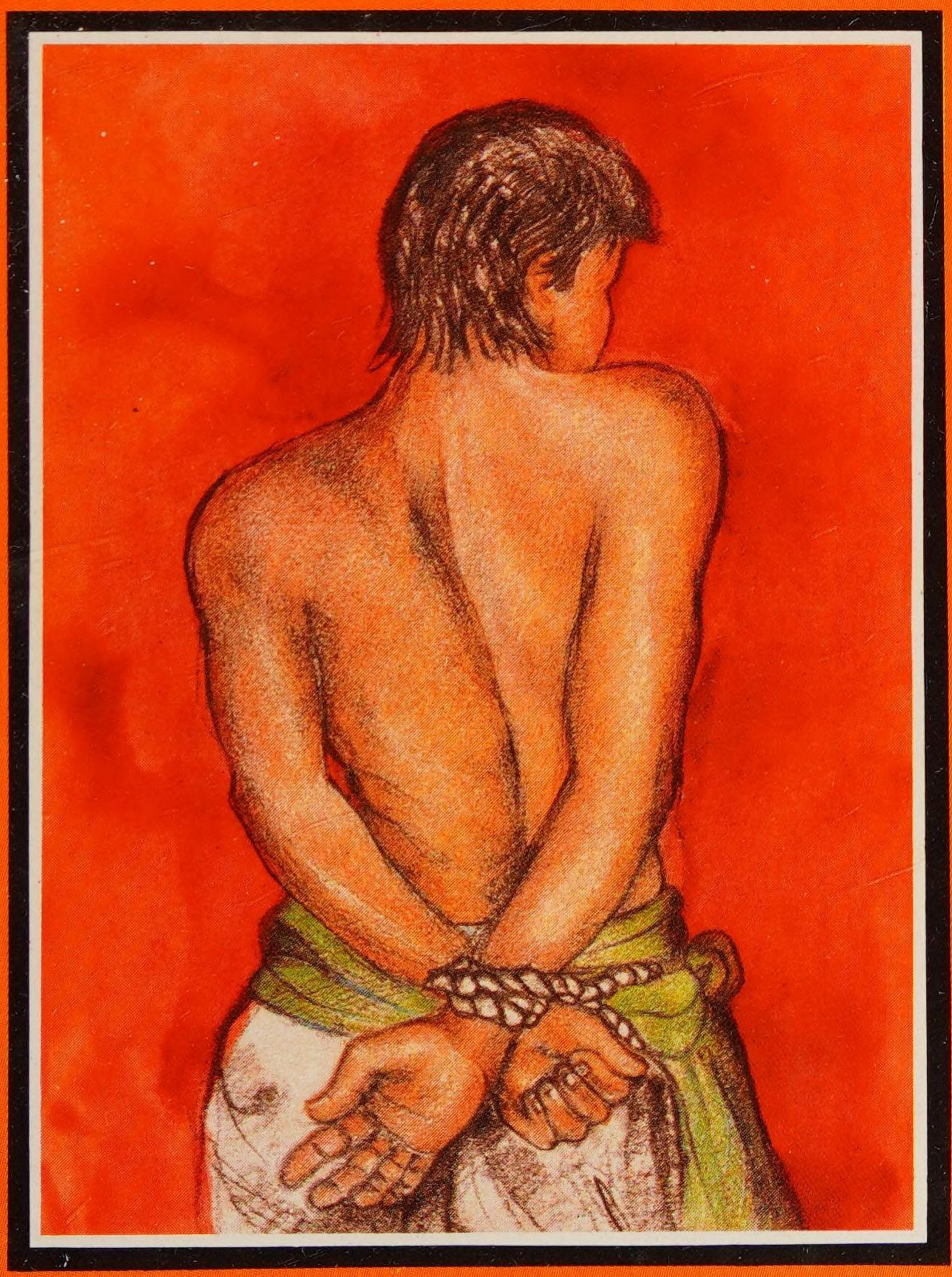
Sahitya Akademi Award-Winning
Autobiographical Novel in Marathi

THE BRANDED

UCHALYA

Laxman Gaikwad



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by

LAXMAN GAIKWAD

The sculpture reproduced on the end paper depicts a scene where three soothsayers are interpreting to King Suddhodana the dream of Queen Maya, mother of Lord Buddha. Below them is seated a scribe recording the interpretation. This is perhaps the earliest available pictorial record of the art of writing in India.

From: Nagarjunakonda, 2nd century A.D.
Courtesy: National Museum, New Delhi

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Uchalya

by

LAXMAN GAIKWAD

Translated from the Marathi Original by

P.A. KOLHARKAR

SAHITYA AKADEMI

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Translator's Note

Uchalya is an autobiographical account in Marathi by Sri Laxman Gaikwad of his early life. Uchalya is the name of a tribe which was notified as criminal under the provisions of the Criminal Tribes' Act first passed in 1871 and subsequently amended from time to time.

For thousands of years many tribes have been living in India almost unknown to the so-called sophisticated society. They have been mostly wanderers shifting from place to place in search of odd jobs (such as harvesting, cattle-tending, stone-cutting) mostly seasonally available. Otherwise they live by hunting wild animals and foraging for wild herbs, roots, fruits. They have been in a way outcasts lower than the lowest scheduled caste, on the bottom-most rung of the social hierarchical ladder. The politics, education, religion, economics of the mainstream-society never touched them and they have been living in their own world of superstition, of primitive norms of justice and of ignorance. All this is graphically delineated in this book which I found to be a very touching experience.

Unfortunately no systematic ethonological, historical and sociological studies are available on these tribes. The early studies by the British Government were from the administrative point of view. One such study — The Notes on Criminal Tribes — in a way brands these tribes as inherently criminal. This study by Kennedy, the Dy. I.G.P. Railways, and Criminal Investigation, Bombay Presidency, prepared in 1901, throws a flood of light on the ways, habits, dress, modus operandi and such aspects of the life of the people of these tribes. Such reports created an indelible impression that these tribes were criminals by nature and, therefore, deserved no sympathy. This view persists even to-day. Gaikwad's book is an eloquent attempt to expose this prejudice and bring people

round to the view that the people of these tribes are human beings and are in need of a helping hand from all to bring them into the mainstream of social life.

It is this compelling tone of the work — militant as well as frank — that prompted me to undertake this translation. I have tried to be as near as possible to the authentic spirit of the book. Sri Laxman Gaikwad has not had much formal education. He has not the polish and advantages of a man of letters. The book suffers from many shortcomings which would be regarded as unpardonable in a well-educated writer. I have tried to stick to the way of narration adopted by Laxman Gaikwad so that the reader of this translation may savour the same experience which I, as the reader of the original savoured.

At places the original book suffers from obscure composition. I have tried to make it intelligible only after consulting the writer and having the meaning made clear to me.

All this work would have been impossible but for the opportunity given by the Sahitya Akademi to translate this interesting book. I am grateful to the Akademi and thank the members concerned with all my heart. Sri Laxman Gaikwad, too, met me, whenever I requested him and discussed with me different aspects of the book. He elucidated the meanings of certain obscure passages and unfamiliar words. His explanations have definitely helped me catch the spirit of the book. I offer my thanks to him for his help.

I received invaluable help in this world from Dr. Vilas Sarang, Head of the Department of English, Bombay University, as I sought his advice and opinions on many occasions. So also I received highly useful suggestions from Prof. Suhas Gole and Sri Deepak Ghare. Sri Subhash Shah and Sri Sundar Burra read the first draft and offered their comments with a view to improving the translation. To all these my thanks are due and Iam very grateful to them for their help.

Bombay *P.A. Kolharkar*

Reflections

I — Laxman Gaikwad — am a dedicated social worker. The community in which I was born has ever been rejected — ostracized by the caste-ridden hierarchy among which it has been fated to live. For hundreds — nay — thousands of years this man-forsaken community, denied its innate humanness by all and sundry, has been forced to live a life no better than that of a godforsaken animal.

The British Government branded us as born criminals and others following suit have always looked down upon us as criminals and still persist with the same parochial attitude. Denied of all decent and lawful means of livelihood the only alternative left to us is to exist by thieving, lifting, pickpocketing.

The higher castes and classes have fully exploited this miserable, helpless situation of ours for their own selfish purposes.

This may be the only community in the world branded as inherent criminals by birth. Why this is so? A sociological study of this dilemma has to be made or is bound to be made sometime.

I have been experiencing from my childhood the poverty and miserable exploitation of the people of this community in which I was born, lived and struggled. Gradually I grew into a worker and took a firm stand in the cause of my people with a resolute faith in their ultimate emancipation.

Everyone in this community feels smothered and suffocated in the social environment in which he or she is forced to live. I often give voice to their plight, their trials and tribulations through lectures and discussions. I know that my people need to be educated and taught to think.

However, while engaged in bringing home to my people that we have every right to live as dignified human beings, that we must live decently and honourably eschewing criminal and immoral ways of earning livelihood, that we must educate ourselves and unite in strength against the injustice inflicted upon us, I realized that the so-called intellectuals, important people, and the middle class had absolutely no idea of the sorrows of my community. Hence this urge to write to awaken this bourgeois society to the sorrows and plight of my unfortunate community.

It is high time that the established political and social leaders and classes set aside their prejudices and preconceptions about my community and began to rethink, in humanistic terms. At the same time those of us who have acquired the benefits of modern education must not forget the inherent bond and must ever remain committed to the betterment of the lot of our mother-community. It is with this dual purpose that I undertake to write down the following rankling account of my life.

Here, on the one hand, is a tribe that, having been denied all lawful living, is forced to resort to thieving and pilfering to satisfy the basic wants — hunger and shelter. There, on the other hand, are the so called respected and educated people brazenly indulging in looting and amassing crores of rupees. Ironically not those who pile up crores by sheer corruption and nepotism, but those who pilfer a paltry sum of ten or fifteen rupees just for their daily bread are branded as thieves and treated with leperous disdain. There are people in the society, who are well-off and blessed with comforts in their worldly life, greedily indulging in immoral, unlawful and corrupt ways just to gratify their craze for luxuries and pleasures. They are not branded.

The more closely I looked at this grotesque state of affairs, the more restless I became. It rankled in my mind that grave injustice had been heaped upon and perpetuated against this unfortunately branded community. There is hardly a project for the betterment and welfare of these people. If ever one is launched, it never reaches them. Their very fundamental right

to live as human beings has been snatched from them.

This and other rights are not going to be won overnight. What is needed is educated awakening, determined struggle and dedicated unionism on the part of the community and introspective rethinking and a fresh outlook on the part of the higher strata in society.

As a social worker I often travel and meet people from several strata of society. These meetings have constantly made me aware of and sensitive to the differences in ethical values and notions of honesty. We have different frames of reference in respect of the morality and integrity of each commuity, class and caste. Thus we evaluate each group with a yard-stick prepared exclusively for it.

The entire society, in consequence of these multistandards, lives a hypocritical and snobbish life sectionwise within the framework developed exclusively for each section.

Only those who are poor and branded, rejected and forsaken are ruthlessly exploited and denied any opportunity of living an honest life, however strongly they may desire to do so. I yearn to change all this. Whether it will change or not only time will tell.

I had little opportunity to acquire education and sophisticated culture. These are the reflections of a non-Matric social worker. Let there be a sociological evaluation rather than a literary one of this work. This is my humble expectation.

It is an attempt of a sensitive mind to pen what it has felt and experienced. This writing has been inspired by the stimulating encouragement of Laxman Mane of *Upara* fame and Sri Balkrishna Renke, the Secretary of the Nomadic and Vimukta Tribes' Association.

During my frequent talks with them in the course of my work they kept on urging and goading me to write down my experiences. I realized that this was very much needed for furthering of the mission of transformation that we have undertaken. The book it is hoped, will help the movement for emancipation.

But I realized that speaking was relatively easier than

writing. The latter required some knowledge of the craft of writing. It was the support and help of Sri Sharankumar Limbale of *'Akkarmashi'* fame that enabled me to tide over the difficulties. It seemed that the expanding material of the book was getting out of hand. He gave a clear and concise form to it. It was owing to his guidance that I could complete this autobiography.

But there was this limitation. Sri Sharankumar Limbale was not available for the final finishing touches as he lived away from Latur. However, Sri Maggiwar, Professor of English and Dr. Suryanarayan Ransubhe, Professor of Hindi of Dayanand Mahavidyalaya, Latur, came forward to help, and through their efforts the autobiography took the final form.

The copy for the printing press was, however, to be made ready within a very short period. Shinde, Daware, Pawar, Tandle, Ghodke, Rathodkar and Kumari Manju Koshtagaonkar were always ready at hand to render whatever help was required. Then Sri Dhananjay Kulkarni and Smt Manju Phaltankar and other friends worked night and day and completed the writing of the manuscript in good time. These are committed young persons who took this work as a part of the movement of transformation and emancipation to which they are fully dedicated. This autobiography sees the light of day owing to the efforts of all these.

Sri Pravin Mahajan's financial assistance from Oxfam has proved invaluable in the social work that we have undertaken.

A neglected and despised youth from a neglected and despised community goes to Latur in search of a job, gets employed in a spinning mill, and for the first time on 15 August addresses a few sentences to the audience present. He was a boy with hardly any education and ignored by all. With unstinting and tireless efforts Sri Bhagwanrao Deshpande moulded him. Thus I grew and further gained confidence in the company of Sri Asaram Guruji, Prof. Motiraj Rathod and Yallappa Vaidu Guruji.

I still work with dedication along with Sri Laxman Mane and Sri Balkrishna Renke. I have received invaluable help from Sri D. S. Gaikwad, my brother-in-law and Prof. B. L.

Gaikwad in my work.

In all this process my wife Smt Chhabutai has always stood by me as my inseparable shadow and given her unstinted co-operation in the work of the movement. Though hailing from an illiterate rural community, she has stood by me through thick and thin, setting aside all her own desires and dreams of comfort. A dedicated social worker has to sacrifice all his own longings and belongings. But my dear wife through her sacrifice and large and noble heart has sustained me in my life and given me strength in my work.

Sri Madhukaka Kulkarni of Sri Vidya Prakashan has made it his mission to publish autobiographical works of sensitive Maharashtrian youths from manforsaken communities. I could complete this work only because of his constant urging and exhortations. You, readers, owe his book to Sri Madhukaka.

1 August 1987
Tilaknagar, Latur

LAXMAN GAIKWAD

NO NATIVE PLACE. No birth-date. No house or farm. No caste, either. That is how I was born. In an *Uchalya*[1] community, at Dhanegaon in Taluka Latur.

It is there that I grew through childhood and youth. I still remember our hut. It was nothing more than a low, hay-thatched roof. All of us had to crawl on our hands and knees to get in or out.

My grandmother, Narasabai ran the household, grandfather being thoroughly useless. He had to report to the police-station twice a day. So he could not take up any permanent work away from the place.

My grandfather, Lingappa, did maintain our household in his heydays, picking pockets, lifting valuables and odd things at markets and fairs. He was a well-known and respected thief in our tribe and area. The Nizam State records mentioned him as a most notorious and dangerous thief. Nobody ever dared cross his path.

Once while drunk he attempted to pick the money tied in the knot of a dhoti tied around a stranger's waist. In cutting the knot with a blade (*Bharat Blade* was most suitable for such jobs) he cut too deep, making a long deep gash in the stranger's body from buttocks to waist. The man bawled in pain as blood gushed from the wound.

The police caught our grandfather and dragged him to our hut, beating him severely all the way. They wanted to search our hut for stolen goods.

While they looked around, I lay like a dead pup in an old, tattered coverlet in a corner of our rickety grass hut.

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[1] *Uchalya* : The name of one of the communities notified as criminal tribes in the All India Criminal Tribes Act. Hence a socially and legally branded community.

Grandfather was handcuffed and the police kept asking him: 'Tell us where you've hidden the stolen money and gold. Show or we'll smash your bones.'

Grandfather wailed piteously: 'See Saab, see for yourself, there's nothing in the hut.'

'Your whore will know,' cried the police and grabbed our grandmother by the hair and thrashed her all over.

My mother, Dhondabai, had already slipped away into the woods as soon as she had heard of the arrival of the police.

The police were beating whomsoever their eyes fell upon—women, children. They squeezed grandmother's breasts, asking her to show the stolen goods.

Then they left, taking grandfather with them. He was jailed for some months.

After his release he was ordered to report to the police station twice a day. Every morning and evening grandfather rode on a donkey to report to the police station.

Subsequently, they made him a State informer, offering him suitable rewards if he disclosed the names of thieves and pickpockets belonging to our tribe. He had to accompany the police to help them trace the addresses and whereabouts of suspected thieves. If he ever failed to report to the police station the police came and beat everybody in our hut.

Grandfather was thus forced to give up his pilfering business, report to the police regularly, and work as a Nizam State informer helping the police to catch thieves from our own tribe.

Nobody would offer work to my father, Martand, as we were known to belong to a branded tribe of criminals. They would not employ my mother, Dhondabai, even as a farm-hand. As grandfather had been rendered useless, my grandmother began to visit fairs and markets to maintain the household. In crowded fairs she removed gold lockets and earrings from children's necks and ears, trinkets and necklaces from the necks of women cutting them loose with her teeth or a blade, and sold them to moneylenders and maintained the house. Sometimes the police visited our village in search of thieves or stolen goods. On such occasions local money-

lenders and the village *patil*[2] bribed the police from our grandmother's deposit with them.

If anyone from our household or tribe wished to leave the place, he had to obtain a permit from the police-*patil*, a bribe for the purpose. We were reduced to the level of animals; for just as permits are needed for cattle to be moved to other places or to be sold in the market, we had to have passes to move about. We had to show them to the police-*patil* and tell him where we were going to, and even then, we could not stay there for more than three days. Barring me—a child—everybody had a pass. If we ever travelled without a pass we were invariably arrested on trumped-up charges, beaten up, and set free only after exorbitant amounts had been extracted from us.

Thus the pass came to be worshipped as God and the blade as Laxmi, the goddess of wealth, in our family. Whenever my grandfather, grandmother and the others in my family set out on a thieving mission, they bought a cock and sacrificed it to the blade, sprinkled some drops of its blood on the blade and the pass; and prayed: 'O God! Grant us success; let our thieving operations be blessed with success, save us from the police.' Then everybody, in turn, bowed in obeisance before the blade and the pass just as people do before gods in temples.

All men are afraid of death, of losing their lives. The very name, *Yamadoot*[3] conjures up the image of death and anyone confronted with it freezes for fear that Yamadoot will take his life away. Whenever the police visited our hut, I panicked as if the very father of Yama had visited us to take my life away. As the police entered and began to search the hut and thrash and kick the inmates, I often pissed and shat in my shorts.

My grandfather, tormented and tortured insufferably by the police, was forced to work as State Informer and help the police in apprehending culprits from our own community by disclosing their names and whereabouts. This made my

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[2]*Patil* : A village headman incharge of law and order.
[3]*Yamadoot* : A messenger of Yama, the God of death.

grandfather many enemies in our tribe. They held a *Panchayat*[4] and argued that ever since Lingappa Gaikwad of the community had started reporting the names of his colleagues to the police, it had become impossible to go on thieving missions. Nor did the tribesmen get jobs as they were known to be thieves by profession. Their children were starving.

The Panchas[5] came to the conclusion that Lingappa being old and weak had no strength to bear the beatings and torture by the police and that some steps had to be taken to stop him for good. Hence it was resolved that he must be killed.

One day they broke into our hut through the thatched-roof, gagged our grandfather and hacked him to death with an axe. The Panchayat saw to it that the death was not reported to the police.

It is impossible in our community to go the police against the Panchayat. Our grandfather was cremated without anybody getting to know of it.

Now that grandfather was dead, the people from our community resumed their usual business of thieving and picking pockets without the fear of being reported since then the entire household depended on grandmother.

Our community is known all over India as a Santmuchchar community. We speak Telugu. Sant means 'market' and muchchar means 'thief.' Hence Santmuchchar means one who steals from weekly markets or bazaars.

We do not know the origin of our caste, tribe or community. The people of our community are spread all over India and are known by two surnames only—Jadhav and Gaikwad. Marriages are arranged between Jadhavs and Gaikwads. The Jadhavs offer their bridegrooms or brides to the Gaikwads or the other way round. There can be no marital ties between a Jadhav and a Jadhav or a Gaikwad and a Gaikwad. Though these are the only two surnames found in our community, there are many clans or *kulams*. The clans among Gaikwads include Ulonor, Bumonir, Kalpithnor. Those among Jadhavs are Kaskonor, Papponor and IIenor.

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[4]*Panchayat* : A community court

[5]*Panchas* : Representatives serving on the panchayat

Clans are taken in consideration in marriage settlements.

In Maharashtra our community is not identified by any one name. There are several names by which people of our community are referred to. Some of these names are: Pathrut, Takari, Bhamta, Uchale, Girnewadar, Kamati, Ghantichor, Wadar. Thus in different districts and parts we are known by different names. In Maharashtra, I have to refer to my clan with different names on different occasions.

I know of no relatives on my father's or mother's side. Where did our tribe originate? Where did it migrate from? I know nothing about this. I know of no maternal or paternal relatives.

As workers were not readily available, Nizam Government drafted us—the people of Uchalya community—as bonded labour to construct a huge lake at Banjepalli. Thousands of people from our community were taken in lorries and forcibly employed for this work. The police kept a strict watch and called the roll twice a day at the work site.

Even then my grandfather and grandmother managed to run away and settle at Dhanegaon. Grandmother was a versatile thief. Each time the police caught her red-handed, she was sentenced for two to three months.

If there was nothing to eat in the hut, my father—his name was Martand—and mother—her name was Dhondabai—and my elder brother, Manikdada, roved around and stole corn, chillis, groundnuts and *sajgure*[6] from distant farms at night. Till they returned, we children starved at home. Even in the dead of night, we used to beat the stolen ears of corn, gather the grains, grind them coarse, boil them and eat.

My brothers-in-law, Santaram of Nevli and Sakharam of Bhargaon, took Manikdada in their group to teach and train him in the different arts and skills of our profession. All the other members of the gang kicked Manikdada with their boots. He could barely stand the long sessions of beatings; Santaram and Sakharam taught him different thieving skills. Whenever Manikdada visited us at our place, he would

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[6]*Sajgure* : Another name for Bajra-Millet

narrate how they ordered him to steal *chappals*[7], bundles, *dhongals*[8] and beat him into obedience.

In our community young apprentices (boys and girls) start their training with lessons in being beaten. They are trained to withstand physical beatings and all sorts of torture so that they will not disclose the names of their colleagues when caught and tortured by the police for information. They are trained to be tough and not to crack up when severely tortured.

One day, our Manikdada was caught at Renapur market while trying to steal. The people from the market thrashed him and threatened him: 'You were stealing chappals. You must be from the gang of thieves. Tell us the names and whereabouts of your cronies.'

He was too cruelly beaten to hold back the names. He began to blurt out all he knew. However, Santaram, Tukaram and others had already slipped away and made their escape.

On his return, Manikdada told the gang: 'I was beaten almost to death.'

Next day they took Manikdada to the river for fishing. All the gang were fishing. They had a very good catch.

The sand by the river burned in the mid-day sun and was scorching hot.

Santaram and Tukaram cursed and abused Manikdada, 'Manikya, you bastard, f...k your mother, you cower in fear like *vannis* and *bammans*[9]. When caught red-handed, you disclose the names of the entire gang! You've brought shame upon and besmirched the name of the tribe of thieves.'

Tempers were rising. All were furious. And all hungry.

They made Manikdada collect dry grass, rubbish and sticks scattered by the river-side. All of them came to the bank of the river to take their meals. On one side some of them were roasting fish. Manikdada was hungry, so he was eagerly waiting for the roasted fish with a *bhakri*[10] in his hand. As he

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[7]*Chappals* : A countrymade leather foot-wear.
[8]*Dhongals* : A coarse woollen blanket.
[9]*Vanis and bammans* : merchants and brahmins.
[10]*Bhakri* : Millet bread

was sitting ready to pounce on the fish and put it in his mouth as soon as it was ready, Santarambhau and Tukaram sent for him and began to grill him.

'Tell us why you disclosed your and our real names, when you were caught stealing. Why did you not bring back *chappals* and bundles of belonging from the market?'

Manikdada explained, 'Those people put chilli powder in my eyes and beat me; only when it became unbearable, I told the names.'

Then Santaram lightly lifted Manikdada and threw him on the burning sand; Tukaram stripped him of his clothes—shorts and shirt, leaving him stark naked. Santarambhau turned Manikdada on his stomach and kicked him viciously with his boots. Dada screamed and yelled sounding like an animal being put to death. The mid-day sun had baked the sand hot with its intense heat. On such burning sand they had thrown Manikdada naked, and were kicking him viciously with their boots. Dada's front and back had turned blood-red.

Tukaram was again and again asking him: 'Speak, won't you bring bundles, *dhongals* back from the markets? Speak Mankya?'

Dada was wailing : 'Don't beat, I will bring.'

Santaram again asked : 'Speak, if you're caught, will you disclose our names'

Dada wailed piteously: 'No, spare me!'

Tukaram again said: 'Will you tell our names, because chilli powder is put in your eyes?'

Saying this they took chilli-powder from the *bhakar* and put it in Dada's anus and eyes and continued to beat him on the burning sand. Only when Dada exploded with shit and piss, they let go of him.

Dada, crazed with intense pain, instantly escaped and ran wildly away, as a rabbit caught in a net escapes from the hand of the hunter and runs through the wild forest for his life.

Dada ran and bawled as his body burned with agonising pain. Finally he jumped into the river. He remained in the water quite a while.

Again they called him and asked: 'Tomorrow there's

market day at Parali. Will you bring back enough loot?'

Dada said, 'I'll bring it. Their beating is nothing compared with yours. Even the police and the Marathas don't beat so cruelly. I will bring the loot henceforth!'

On Dada saying this they gave him one fish and one *bhakar*. Dada ate the fish and *bhakar* and stayed with us at our hut that hight. Next day they took Dada to Parali for thieving.

Frightened of the beating of the gang Dada stole half a gunny-bag of footwear and five bundles of belongings that day. Santaram then gave him one kilo *jeelebi*[11]. Dada subsequently developed into a versatile thief and brought bountiful booty.

Grandmother had become senile and tired. She could not stand police beating any more. She told us, 'When the police catch me, they hang me upside down by the legs and lash the soles of my feet with a whip, thrust burning cigarette-butts into my anus. If I don't confess to the theft, they bring shit near my mouth and force me to eat it and keep on beating me.' I've had enough of it. Since Manik has started thieving, I'll call it a day.

A few days later, however, she fell ill and died. Dada took upon himself the duty of maintaining the household.

My father could not walk normally. It was believed that because he had been mauled by a ghost his face and legs were paralysed. He was bandy-legged and limped and lurched in an unsteady walk and stammered while talking. Hence he could not go on thieving missions.

What had never come to pass in respect of our community happened in respect of father. Chamle, a rich farmer, with some hesitation and reluctance, gave my father the work of guarding his farm.

At that time my father, mother, Manikdada, Shambhubhau and Harischandra were living in the hut. Mother's father, Sayabu-Tata, lived in a hut nearby. I had five brothers and two sisters. Ratna was the elder of the two sisters. Parvatibai was older than Manikdada. Ratnabai was married to Santaram

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[11] *Jeelebi* : Sweetmeat prepared from refined flour.

of Nevli. She died when I was a mere child. Parvatibai was married to a person in Gunjoti. There were too many mouths to feed in our house and earnings were very meagre.

Mother's father, Sayabu-Tata, went hunting regularly. He hunted fish, rabbits, deer, foxes, wild cats, rats, crabs, tortoise, mongoose. We always had some sort of meat in our meals. There were two hounds in the house. They helped Sayabu-Tata in hunts.

Tata was very astute, though old. Tata's ways of thieving were different from those of my Dada, grandfather or mother. This was what he did. There were plenty of rats in our hut. Tata used these rats in his thefts. Tata and I used to keep traps in the hut and catch the rats. Then, Tata would set the rats free at night in a field with full-grown wheat. The rats would gnaw and cut off the ears of wheat from the stalks and store them in rat-holes. After the farmer had harvested and garnered the crop, Tata and I would dig the rat-holes with a *panchakola*[12] and bring up the ears of wheat that the rats had hidden. I would quickly gather them in a shoulder-bag.

The farmers would watch us, but they did not think we were doing anything amiss. They thought that we picked up only the wheat-ears stored by the rats that infested their farms. So they did not grumble. We used to fill the shoulder-bag full with the ears of wheat thus gathered. The collection would be so heavy that Tata would barely manage to carry it on his head.

We not only gathered the wheat found in rat-holes but also caught the rats. Tata and I would carry flint with us. I would collect sticks and dry grass and make fire with the help of the flint. Then we would roast the rats caught in the fields. We did not wait to eat till we reached home, we ate right there in the woods and the remains we carried home for my mother.

Tata had filled four *mutkule*[13] with this stolen wheat. Our Dada and Anna were married on the strength of this wheat.

As I always accompanied Tata on his hunting expeditions, I

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[12]*Panchakola* : An iron bar with a wooden handle, used for digging.

[13]*Muktule* : A cylindrical bamboo-structure coated with cowdung from outside, a usual storing place on farms.

had eaten any kind and number of animals: rats, rabbits, mongoose, deer, iguanas, fox, patridges, ducks, cranes, doves, tortoise, fish, wild cats, pigeons, pigs, crabs, sheep, goats, water-hens, peacocks.

Now Bhagwan-Anna and Samhu Bhau started accompanying Manik-Dada on thieving trips to take charge of stolen bundles. Shambhu-bhau and Bhagwan-Anna were, otherwise, quite capable of doing odd jobs. But so branded and distrusted was our community socially that no one offered work to the people of our tribe. They did not employ us even on chores done in the woods.

It was widely believed that the persons from our Uchalya community worked and watched by day and stole by night. So nobody employed Anna and Bhau. They had so far never indulged in thieving. Now, however, they started accompanying Dada on thieving trips. They were made tough with the usual sessions of beating.

In our community there are gangs who undertake the training of apprentices to develop their thieving skills. In every society, there are teachers, who teach students in schools and parents who beat their offspring to make them learn. In our community, however, everything is topsyturvy. There are different gangs to teach different thieving skills to our children. We have four kinds of thieving skills:

Khistang matne—picking pockets

Chappal, muthal aanane—stealing footwear and bundles of things.

Paddu ghalane—deception; and

Uthewaari—deception by sleight of hand while engaging persons in conversation, e.g. substituting spurious gold for the genuine.

Parents beat their children and force them to acquire these skills. The teacher takes six months'earnings as his fee for this training after the pupil is fully trained.

Our Manikdada's teacher had taken three months' earnings as his fee. Fees were being collected even from Anna and Bhau. Now Anna, Bhau and Dada started to go on thieving trips from our hut.

I was the youngest and therefore dearly cuddled and fondled by all. Harchanda was my immediate elder brother. he was sent to tend sheep. he was subject to epileptic fits and had attacks particularly on thefull moon and new moon days in a lunar calendar. Sticky saliva dribbled from his mouth just as it dribbles fromn the mouth of a mad dog. On such days he growled and moved restlessly about the hut in a doglike manner. a worn-out old shoe or *chappal* had to be held close to his nose on such occasions. Then he would become normal in about one or two hours. I looked after him, though I was younger. Whenever he went near fire or water he used to get an attack of epileptic fits. My mother asked me to be always by his side. I remained close to him with an old *chappal* or show on full moon and new moon days. I always slept near him. We always dressed in loose, stolen shirts and shorts, which were shapiless and ill-fitting.

None, including myself, ever received new well-fitting clothes. All our clothes were stolen ones. Even women bought sarees at cheap rates from persons who had stolen them from markets. Torn clothes were used for making quilts.

As it was, our hut was a dingy affáir. We were crowded thick in it like a cluster of fleas. Harchanda and myself slept beside our sheep in one and the same hut. We shivered and froze in winters.

Harchanda and I had only one coverlet between us. Even the dogs snuggled down in our coverlet. Lambs were tied nearby. The lambs pissed and the hot water trickled under our bodies. The lambs' hot piss felt comfortably warm like a warm covering. We wished lambs kept on pissing so that it warded off the chilly feeling.

On getting up in the morning we never washed the coverlet, but spread it on the roof to dry. The piss-smell filled our nostrils with a strong odour, yet we used the same sodden coverlet. Our senses were dead and we were beyond feelings.

The coverlet teemed with lice. When we killed them Harchanda and I kept the count mostly up to a hundred or two hundred and then gave up. We spread the coverlet in the

hot sun. The lice, scorched by the heat, stirred restlessly. We crushed them with stones. Even then we did not wash the coverlet. We washed it only once a year. On *Dusserah*[14] day. Then used it for another year.

I did not take a bath for months. Nobody from the household ever told me to take a bath. Washing clothes was not even thought of.

Sambha, Bhima, Tulshiram of our fraternity lived by our side. Sometimes there were violent quarrels and they ended in our breaking one another's heads.

In my boyhood I often quarrelled with Sheshi, Keri, Panchfuli, Tukya, Narya—all urchins of my age. The quarrels were over piglets. Tukya, Sheshi, Narya stole our piglets, roasted and ate them. So I would steal their piglets and put them in our herd. On the day of *Kar*[15], Tulshiram, Pandurang, Manikdada, Bhagwan-Anna would kill a sturdy pig; if a pig was not available, then a sow.

On such an occasion, some of us—the young ones—would spot a strong pig, pursue it with howls, make a din and hustle it to one side and trap it in a narrow lane. Tulshiram would enter the lane with a lasso and catch the pig. He would tie its four legs together and haul it onto Manikdada's shoulder.

Near our hut there was an open space which we used for killing pigs. We young boys and girls would search all the rubbish heaps around the place and collect sticks, rubbish and hay and throw them on the spot where the pig was to be roasted. Women from the village used that spot for shitting.

Dada and Anna would call us and promise us pieces of meat from the pig's back if we swept the spot clean of shit and other excreta with a broom. We, too eagerly swept away the shit and rubbish with brooms.

Tulshiram gave a hefty blow on the neck of the pig with a thick iron rod (generally used for breaking loose rocks in a stone quarry). The pig would stretch and jerk its legs and die a slow death. Then sticks were inserted under the carcass and

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[14]*Dusserah* : A popular Hindu festival celebrated all over India.

[15]*Kar* : A day previous to Makar Sankrant, celebrated generally on 14th January every year.

laid over it, dry grass was spread on top and the pig was roasted. Even while we were roasting the pig, women from the village sat in front of us and shat as if that was the only spot available. In the morning heaps of human-dung could be seen all over the place. Often as we moved about, we stepped on these heaps. It is in such a shit-yard that we roasted and ate the pigs.

First, Tulshiram cut the belly and removed the intestines. Then Manikdada removed the liver, cut it into pieces and distributed them. We gulped down the liver-pieces without chewing. Our hands and mouths were smeared red with blood. These pieces tasted deliciously hot and we greedily extended our hands begging for some more.

All the dogs — Pilya, Champi, Gulbya — barked frantically and rushed to get at the intestines. As Tulshiram threw away the intestines, all the dogs pounced on them and battled for a share

Then Tulshiram cut pieces from the back of the pig and distributed them. We enjoyed eating these tasty bits very much. Even as we were busy eating, Yalama and Maratha women would be busy shitting near by. As we begun to eat the pig, they held their noses, shitting all the while.

I could eat any number of *wal*[16], it tasted like coconut-kernel. We felt no way embarrassed even though the women from higher castes held their noses in disgust. On the contrary, I thought, why must they shit there, if they had to hold their noses; and why at all should they shit near our hut. But their shitting was beneficial to us in a way. Our pigs were nourished and sustained by those heaps of shit that they ate. So we also wished that the women used the spot in front of our hut for their daily shitting sessions.

Now there were three — Dada, Anna and Bhau — in our hut who were actively engaged in thieving. Sometimes, I too accompanied the gang to the market in Latur, Ambejogai, Renapur. I looked after the bundles and the loot. Dada and Bhau would make rounds in the markets and pilfer bundles of things, oil-tins, and footwear. I would sit at one place

[16]*Wal* : a piece of meat from the back of a pig.

guarding the loot. When a substantial collection was made, we would retrace our steps back to our hut. Thus we formed a sort of family gang of thieves.

I began to go regularly with Dada. We would often find *bhakari* and *dhapatya*[17] in the bundles. I used to eat them. Moreover, Dada used to buy *jeelebi*, and *pedhe*[18] for me. I would enjoy going with him on these trips.

Dhobi's Narya also used to accompany us. There was quite a cordial, friendly relationship between us. Tulshiram from our fraternity had bought Narya from a dhobi for one hundred rupees.

One day some people of our fraternity had gone to the river for fishing. At that time a dhobi had also come there for washing clothes. The wife of that dhobi had run away with a Maratha leaving behind their two sons. The dhobi had brought his two sons to the river. Our people as well as people of Salgare and Bhargaon trained their young apprentices in the arts and skills of thieving on the banks of the river. The dhobi knew that our people trained young boys in the ways of thieving and employed them in the business. The dhobi, since the elopement of his wife, had to carry his two sons on his two shoulders, and the entire village-washings on his head. He was tired of looking after his sons. He asked our people: 'Would you take my sons in your gang?' There were two or three gangs of our community there. They were pleased at the offer. The boys would be no burden once they started thieving.

So Gopal of Halgara asked the dhobi what price he would want for the boys. The dhobi in a counter-offer asked what they were prepared to offer for the boys. That set up a close competition among our gangs. Sakaram quoted his price and offered to buy the boys. Then the people of the Uchalya community were engaged in hectic bidding and finally, Gopal of Salgara purchased the dhobi's elder son, Dagadya, for a hundred and fifty rupees, thinking that he would soon be available for the thieving business. The younger one, Narya,

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[17]*Dhapatya* : A king of roti

[18]*Pedhe* : Sweetmeat made of milk

was bought by Tulshiram of our fraternity for one hundred rupees.

Narya's brother Dagadya when he grew up, learnt his skills from Gopal of Halgara and became a versatile thief. Similarly, Narya, on growing up took his lessons from Tulshiram and became a good thief. Tulshiram had two wives. The senior one, Manjula, had no issue. So she brought up Narya as her own son. But no one from our community was ready to offer his daughter to Narya in marriage as he was from the dhobi caste. For years he could not enter into a marital relationship. So when Narya became a versatile thief, like the people from our community, he was married to a dumb daughter of Tukaram of Bhargaon. Nobody was prepared to marry Tukaram's daughter because she was dumb, so Tukaram readily and happily agreed to give his daughter to Narya in marriage.

Dada, Anna, Bhau, had started getting good earnings. Once the police caught Anna while he was stealing an oil-tin from the market. They thrust chilli-powder in his rectum and eyes and beat him. His eyes looked blood-red. They asked him, 'Where are your fellow-gangsters?'

They stripped him naked and walked him round and round through circular thoroughfares. He was so frightened of the cruel beating that he showed the police our hut. The police came to our hut, dragging him with them. All the inmates of the hut were made to line up.

The police whipped everybody. They thrashed the women and the children from our hut all over, wherever their hands led them. Dhondamai never knew stealing. She never went that way. Yet they pressed and squeezed her breasts and grilled her: 'Tell us where your sons have hidden the stolen goods?' She only wept bitterly. There was nothing in the hut. What could the poor mother show? They snatched away her *mangalsutra*[19] and another cheap necklace.

The police alleged that everything in the house was stolen property and arrested Anna, Sambha, Dada. A policeman told

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[19]*Mangalsutra* : A sacred marriage-necklace; a woman is not supposed to part with it till her husband's death.

my mother, 'Bring two hundred rupees, then they will be released.'

To save Anna, Bhau, Dada from cruel police beatings and torture, mother sold all the sheep in the market and paid two hundred rupees. Only then did the police release them without bringing any charge against them in the court. Mother's gold ornaments were kept by the police for themselves. After all, we were thieves by profession; who could we lodge a complaint with? So we had to keep quiet.

Seeing the beatings and tortures, I wet my shorts. Hence I was unwilling to accompany Dada on these thieving trips. Father, as a result of his service with Chamle, had begun to grasp the state of affairs a little better. He understood that a child must learn to read and write. Instead of a Bharat blade, he put in my hand a slate and pencil and enrolled my name in a primary class for children. I started going to school.

I had just started going to school. It was all novel and strange to me. All the urchins started harassing me, as if a poor lamb had entered a pack of wolves. They threw stones at me because an Uchalya's child had dared come to school. They would taunt mockingly: '*Lachiman Tata khekdyacha curry khata*.[20] Even then I continued to go to school.

Three-four weeks after I started going to school, Sheshi Tukya, Panchfuli and other children living nearby our hut were affected by loose motions and vomitings.

Our neighbouts — Tulshiram, Pandurang, Sambha called my father from the farm and began to quarrel with my parents. They accused and chided my father:

'Because you have admitted your son to school, our children are suffering from loose motion and vomiting. Never had our lane suffered from cholera before. No illiness or epidemic had touched our lane. Look, Martanda, since your bastard of a son has started going to school, diseases are visiting us. We are not merchants and brahmins to admit our children to school. Has anybody from the thieves' community ever gone to school? Oh Martand! schooling was never good for us. Has anybody from among our forefathers ever gone to

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[20]Lachman Tata eats crabs' curry.

school? If our children started going to school, our race would be doomed. Goddess Yellamma will be furious. Look Martand, if your son continues to go to school, we shall call the Panchayat and ostracize you.'

Thus the fraternity threatened my father. All the men and women made a terrible din, shouting and railing at Father. All the people from our fraternity cursed me saying that I was a white-footed wretch, anguring ill, and charged that since I had begun to go to school, their children were afflicted with diseases.

Father relented and told me to sit at home.

As it was I was harassed by the children of merchants and brahmins, as the young one of another bird left in a hen-coop, is pecked at viciously and tormented. So I felt quite relieved at not being required to go to school any more.

But Kulkarni Guruji, the *bamman* (brahmin) teacher, seeing that I remained absent, told his students to lift me by the hands and feet and bring me to school.

This irritated the people of our community and they decided to call the community panchayat. They resolved that either Martand must leave the village or Lakshya must be removed from the school.

If anybody dared disobey the Panchayat resolutions, he would be ostracized, nobody would even touch him; they served him food from a distance, he would neither be invited nor permitted to attend marriages. No marital relations would be allowed with such an ostracized person. If he visited the house of an in-law, he would be served food in a basket and given water in a plate.

So Martand met Kulkarni Guruji and appraised him of the consequences and requested him to remove my name from the school register.

Then Kulkarni Guruji came to the lane where our community lived and asked them, 'If, as you say, your lane is afflicted with cholera because Martand's son attends school, then why is not the whole village afflicted similarly with cholera? All the boys and girls from the village also attend the school regularly. Why is only your lane affected?'

Tulshiram said to the Guruji, 'Their castes have a right (sanctioned by religion and tradition) to learn to read the write, but we are not so permitted.'

Then Guruji gave a patient explanation and invited a general practitioner to give some medicinal tablets to cure loose motions. As a result all were cured of their affliction.

That brought about a reconciliation and the Panchayat acquiesced with Guruji and I started going to school again. I started writing *one... two...*

Tata went to catch fish every day. He used to bring in a good haul. So Mother told him: 'Take Laxman with you. He will churn the water, hustle the fish.' I too felt happy that Tata would teach me how to catch fish, how to spread nets, how to get hold of crabs. I used to accompany Tata with a fish basket.

On our way if Tata saw a squirrel, he would be happy. Tata would mix jaggery and flour and carry the paste in a cloth bundle. That paste—flour mixed with jaggery—tasted irresistably good. So if no squirrel was found for catching, I would steal the lump from Tata's pocket and eat it.

Tata always kept a horse-hair lasso with him. As soon as he saw a squirrel, he would warn me, hand over the fishing-net to me and wind the lasso round the tree where he had seen the squirrel. Then he would apply the paste to the strands of the lasso. I would then bring small stones for Tata. He would look for squirrels and throw stones at them. A squirrel would come down cautiously, eat the paste and climb up the tree. I wished that squirrels would come down instead of going up while eating the dabs of paste. Sooner or later a couple of squirrels would descent and get entangled in the strands while nibbling at the mixture.

Though Tata was old, he was agile. He would run with a piece of cloth, grab the two squirrels with a swift move and strangle them. While I held on to the tail of one squirrel, he would press the neck of the other. Then he would loosen the lasso, which had been tightly wound round the tree between two nails at two ends, by using a stone. Only then could the squirrels be removed.

Before folding up the lasso by winding it round the fingers and putting it in the pocket. Tata would bow before the squirrels as they, being the first to be hunted, gave an auspicious start to the hunting expedition.

We used to go to the lakes at Ramjanpur and Kapasha. Tata would fix the net and I would move round the edge of the lakes with a basket in my hand. When a big fish got caught in the net, Tata would run and grab it. He would hold it firmly in his hand and bring it up. Then he would take the basket from me and throw the fish into it. In shallow waters there were small fishes and he used a *wawar*[21] for them. Sometimes he used to catch fish by using a thrownet. Then he would teach me how to disentangle the fish from the net. Till a good number of fish collected in the net, he would catch crabs.

One day he came across a very big crab. When Tata put his hand in the hole to catch it, the crab closed its sharp claws round Tata's finger cutting into the flesh and held fast to it. Tata could not shake off the crab. Tata bawled in pain. Even then he pulled the crab out of the hole. He threw it on the sand. Blood flowed from his finger.

Tata told me to collect grass. He said, 'This crab has torn my finger. So let us cook it alive without breaking its claws and legs and eat it.' I was angry that Tata was hurt badly and eager too for a tasty crab meal. So I quickly pulled sticks out of a farm-hedge and collected grass and threw the grass and sticks near Tata. Tata took out a piece of flint, put a wad of cotton on it, and made fire by striking on the flint. Then the crab, which had torn Tata's finger was roasted alive and eaten along with its stings.

As we neared the hut, after fishing, Tata would spit and ask me to spit too. When I asked him why we should spit, he replied, 'A ghost, an evil spirit, accompanies us; we should spit so that it runs away.' Then Tata would put all the fish from the shoulder-bag into the basket. Meanwhile, I would go and bring water. Tata would sort out crabs, *chingalyas*, *vanaj* and big fish. Then I would pour water over them.

Our neighbours would look at us enviously. They would

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[21] *Wawar* : A net with small interstices to catch very small fish.

come near us saying: 'Sayabu has had a good catch today.' They would buy a hundred grams or a quarter kilo or so from Tata. Some of them would be drunk, they would quarrel to buy on credit. Sometimes Tata would sell all the fish. He would curse him and ask why he did not keep some for our house. Then he would reply that he would bring plenty the next day, and ask us to prepare crab-curry that day.

I used to hold the crab by its ends and tear open its centre and take out its yellow 'mand'. Then I would put its claws in a mortar and grind and smash them and throw away the pieces of shell. We would prepare tasty crab-curry at night, and eat it with rice-gruel or *bhakari*. This was our daily routine.

My father did not like that I caught fish. He called Tata disdainfully a vermin-killer. He often quarrelled with Tata. 'Why do you teach these things to my son?'

Once we came to know that there was a wild cat in the village-Patil's haystack. So Tulshiram, Narya, Bhima and I went to catch it. We took with us Tulshiram's Pillya (a dog) and Sambha's Champi (a bitch) to the haystack in the yard.

At one end we fixed the net used to catch wild cats and from the other end hustled the wild cat by throwing stones at it. Narya held Pillya giving him a loose leash. Suddenly the cat rushed out of the stack. Tulshiram yelled loudly in warning. He egged the dogs the dogs on to chase the cat shouting: 'Pillya Chhoo! Champi Chhoo!' Instantly the dogs were released. Pillya chased the running cat and mauled it. Tulshiram ran there and took the cat out of Pillya's jaws, and we retraced our steps to our hut.

All the people from the village were looking at us as we carried the cat. 'How dirty these people are!' they said. They grumbled that these bastards, *Pathruts*,[22] ate even domestic cats.

We were confused and did not know whether the cat was the domesticated village cat or a wild cat from the woods. At last we roasted it, and Tulshiram, Narya, Sambha, Bhima, and Tata shared its meat. At first, I did not take anything because I

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[22]*Pathruts* : One of the names used for this community.

was terribly afraid of father. Then Tata and I stealthily went to Tulshiram's place and ate. Though I ate, I never admitted it openly, so scared I was of father's anger.

Living in Chamle's home as a servant, father often gave us a few words of wise advice. 'We should live like other village people. The village people do not allow us to take water from wells. They give us water from a distance without touching us. They do not allow us to visit temples.' Such were his words of advice given daily. To add to this was the hue and cry over the cat we killed in the village. People howled that the Pathruts had eaten a domesticated village cat. Nobody gave us water when we went to the village well. So the people from our community quarrelled with Tulshiram. Since then Tulshiram gave up catching cats from the village and hunted only dogs, rabbits, deer, foxes and such other animals.

Once we came to know that there were many rat-holes in the wheat field of a brahmin. Tata and I went there. On one side I and at the distance one furlong away Tata began searching those rat-holes for ears of wheat. Suddenly a *bamnin*[23] came to keep watch on the crop in the field. She thought that we were stealing full grown wheat-ears. She rushed to me and asked, 'Eh boy, what are you doing?' I replied, 'I'm just searching a hole.' Instantly she slapped me hard. I began to cry and said, 'Look ma'am, I have taken nothing from your field.' Tata came there. He explained to the brahmin woman, 'We dig out the wheat ears stored by rats in rat-holes and maintain ourselves on whatever we find.' The woman was satisfied with the explanation and allowed us to search.

My father took his meals at Chamle's house. It was a service with meals. So father seldom came to the hut.

One day he came at sun-set. He had come to know that Tata, Mother and I had eaten a mouse and a cat. Whenever father came home he beat somebody almost to death. I hid myself in a shit-yard as I learnt that father had come home. In his cross-examination of mother, he did not ask about me. I thought that I would not be beaten. I stealthily came to the hut.

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[23]*Bamnin* : A brahmin woman

Father took my mother into the hut and forced her to do sit-ups. Then he brought her out beating her violently all the while.

Tata came there and asked Father, 'Why are you beating her? She is my only daughter.' Father was furious. He took the grass-cutter's scythe and aimed a blow at Tata. Mother stepped and covered Tata. The scythe struck mother and not Tata. She received a blow on her head and she fell down flat. Blood gushed out through her wound. Then Pandurang, Sambha and Tulshiram came to her rescue. Dada and Anna raised mother and filled her wound with turmeric powder and dressed it with a piece of cloth.

Father pulled a wooden staff from the wattle-wall and began to beat Tata, saying, 'You eat rats and cats.' We all began to bawl and howl in fear. A dog was lapping up mother's blood that had spilt on the floor where she had fallen.

Dada, Anna, Bhau were very angry. They knew Father always tortured and beat mother suspecting her of infidelity. Whenever mother came late from her milk-selling rounds, father would say, 'You spend your time with your paramour! Saru is not my daughter,' and beat mother severely.

Saru was my elder sister. Whenever Saru came to visit us from her husband's house, father used to treat her very unkindly. He always grumbled: 'Why do you take her in? Why do you give her a sari and a blouse?' He would then force mother to do sit-ups as a punishment.

That day too father took mother into the hut, bolted the door and began to beat her. So Dada, Anna and Bhau beat our father with sticks. Since then father hardly came to the hut.

My father and Tata had unfriendly relations. They could not put up with each other. Tata was my mother's father. He was now old and worn out. He had no other relation. He was runing high fever. His hands and legs were swollen. He did not get meat to eat for a pretty long time as he was running high fever and could not go hunting. He yearned for meat. Now that he was old he could not hunt any more. So he often expressed his wish to go to his brother-in-law of Jawali. His

brother-in-law bred plenty of pigs. So he was taken to Jawali and left there.

He always suffered from severe pains in his stomach. But no one ever took him to a dispensary. They treated him at home branding his stomach with a *bidi* of *Kulwa* (a sort of cigarette made of Kulwa).

That resulted in a festered wound. It festered so much that it was full of worms. Mother told me to remove the worms from his wound with a stick. On going to Jawali his wound and fever took a more serious turn. We came to know that Tata died of that serious illness.

My mother and my brothers — Dada, Anna and Bhau — went to his funeral. Harchanda and I were not taken because there was no money for our fare. They went to the funeral leaving me, Harchanda and my sister-in-law at home. Harchanda and I wept bitterly remembering Tata.

Harchanda had then an epileptic attack. He rolled all over the house and began to dribble saliva. He began to howl and vomit. I was frightened. There was no shoe or *chappal* to hold close to his nose. So I searched and brought a torn shoe from a nearby Bembada's rubbish ditch. I held it close to Harchanda's nose. The fit subsided and he came back to normal after a while.

Sometimes my sister-in-law (Manikdada's wife) went to the village to retouch flour-grindstones. I used to accompany her with a gunnybag. The gunnybag contained a flint-stone, a chisel and wooden splinters. My sister-in-law would bring out round millstones to work on them.

Kunbi women (Maratha women) removed the flour from the grindstones before an untouchable worker, who was usually from our community, touched it. Sometimes my sister-in-law told me to touch the grindstones as soon as we reached the spot. For after we touched the grindstone, the flour in it was regarded as polluted and unfit for consumption by high caste people. Such polluted flour was given to us. Moreover, we received one anna for the retouching work on the grindstones. So I used to touch the grindstones as soon as we reached the place of work.

My sister-in-law would sometimes whine, "Madam, the poor child is hungry, please give him a few stale pieces of leftover *bhakar*. So I would get the previous day's *bhakar*, curry or vegetable and buttermilk. I used to take out hurriedly a small bowl from the bag and take in it whatever was offered.

Retouching grindstones was not, however, a steady, regular business. We had, therefore, started selling milk, and that kept the wolf away from the door. Mother used to collect milk from our house and village and go to Latur to selit it. She would always bring some edibles for us. Sometimes, the milk curdled; then, mother brought it home and wept bitterly. But I used to be pleased, for Dada used to mix jaggery in it and give me. I liked that sweetened milk.

Mother's milk-selling business used to bring in a good amount.The people of our fraternity were envious of us; and sometimess they stole the utensils full of milk from our house at night. Mother would bitterly weep over the theft.

Mother had bought three or for corrugated iron sheets out of the earnings from the milk-business; she replaced the grass-roof by these sheets and the bamboo structure by a stone wall. She also built a shed for animals on the other side of the hut. We tied our buffaloes and sheep in the shed. Otherwise every year as the rainy season approached, there was the hectic activity of stitching and repairing the roof. It was done with a bamboo-needle using thin strips cut from shreds of jute leaves as thread.

We were all very pleased when we had a house with an iron-sheet-roof in place of a thatched bamboo-roofed structure. We felt quite vain about it. Before it, the roof leaked profusely in rainy seasons. The hut used to be wet all over. There used to be pools of water. One person had to remain at home only to remove the rain water. Wherever it leaked, we placed a basket, a tin bowl or a flat metal plate to catch the rain water. It leaked at so many that even all the utensils were not enough to take care of the leaking spots. We had to sleep on the wet floor with rain water dripping from above.

For months I used to go without a bath, I had a very dirty

habit in my childhood. I used to wipe the snot of the nose with my shirt-sleeve and chew the snot-smeared part of the shirt. It used to taste salty and I would keep on chewing. I chewed till there was a hole where I chewed. Then I shifted a little farther and continued chewing. My nose always ran profusely.

As I was always very dirty, My head was covered with boils all over. There were so many boils that pus and water oozed out of them. I used to touch the sores and smell them. My hair was stuck up together in places with sticky pus and water. At long last I showed the boils to my mother. She exclaimed, 'You dirty son-of-a-gun, you're covered with boils. Why didn't you show them earlier? You die now.' She got Dada to bring scissors and cut off all my hair. she removed the scabs from the wounds and saw that they were covered with worms. She was awfully frightened and said, 'This disease seems to be the curse of the Goddess. Harlot that I am, I gave up fasting on Tuesdays and so my poor son is afflicted with this dirty disease.' She brought ash of the cowdung-cake from the stove and prayed, 'Oh! Goddess- Mother! Please cure my child of this disease. As long as I don't sacrifice a goat to you, I shall fast both on Fridays and on Tuesdays.' She smeared my head with that ash and applied it to the sores.

Then they fetched Ganapati, the shepherd, from the village. Ganapati took out from his pocket a pair of forceps used for picking fleas and other insects from sheep. My mother and Dada tied me to a pole. Ganapati poured phenyle, which he used for his sheep, on my sores. It burned badly and I howled in pain. I felt was dying. Mother shouted, 'Shut up, you idiot, look how the worms are wriggling about!' Ganapati began to pick the worms one by one rapidly. I cried throughout this operation. Then mother bathed me in hot scalding water.

Meanwhile Dada brought some splinters of the bark of the neem tree which had grown near the temple of the Goddess and one anna worth of camphor. He ground the neem splinters and camphor, made a paste in coconut oil, and, applying the paste on all the sores, made me sit in the sun. It burned for some time, but slowly I felt its soothing effect.

Mother decided to offer in sacrifice one lamb from our own stock. Goddess Bhavani was held in great reverence and worshipped in our family.

Our family had built a temple to the Goddess in our village. The image of the Goddess, which was installed in the temple, was brought by my grandmother from Tuljapur (a famous place of pilgrimage to the temple of Goddess Bhavani), when she had gone there on a thieving trip. In fact she had brought it as a pumice stone for cleaning the feet and body while taking a bath. But as she neared the house, she went into a trance and in the trance the Goddess of Tuljapur came to her and said, 'I'm not a pumice stone. I am the Goddess of Tuljapur. Instal me here.' The pumice stone was installed there and the temple was built. So our family had the honour and privilege of worshipping that Mother Goddess. Oil and redochre[24] were applied to the image. With repeated applications the stone mother now weighed sixty-seventy kilos.

At an early dawn one Tuesday a lamb was carried in a procession to the accompaniment of drum beats. Karim-chacha, our Muslim nieghbour, was invited to attend. Everybody in our household applied *Halad-Kunku*[25] and bowed before the Goddess. I was made to bow first. After all had bowed Mother sprinkled water on the sacrificial lamb and bowed before the Goddess.

Karim-chacha said 'Allah!' in reverence and laid the lamb on the ground on its flank, and holding its neck on the edge of the ditch, cut a slit in its throat. Blood gushed in torrents and the ditch in front of the Goddess filled to the brim. Then the head of the lamb was severed and the legs were cut and placed before the Goddess.

The baskets from the people of the village were called for. In the meanwhile, Dada removed the skin and cut the meat into pieces. In our community the village-Patil was held in great respect, so I was to bring his basket. The Patil gave me the the basket and told me to put in it only pieces of meat

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[24]*Redochre* : Lead oxide.

[25]*Halad-Kunku* : Turmeric and vermillion powder.

and nothing else. He told us that they did not eat flour and salt from our Pathrut community. I wondered how the Patil regarded dry flour and salt as taboo, while he could readily receive our wet sticky meat There was the basket of the village *Mang*[26] also.

Seven baskets were kept in the circle. Mother sat in the centre. A few pieces of meat were put in each basket. The basket of the *Mang* was kept at a distance from the other baskets. Mother put meat in his basket, taking care not to touch it. Salt and flour were put and a coconut was smashed. Incense was sprinkled on a burning cake of cowdung. And all bowed before the basket of the Goddess chanting; 'Uda, Uda, Ambabai.'

Mother went to Latur every day to sell milk. She would always say, 'I will take you to Latur,' but she never did it. She would often bring some eatable or other for me. I always cried and begged mother to take me with her. Once there was the Siddheshwar Fair at Latur. For a week I was after my mother as I wanted to go to the fair. I yearned to see Latur. I had heard that it was full of motor-cars, motor-cycles, revolving cradles. I also wished to eat the delicious dishes available in hotels.

On the day of the Siddheswar Fair, Mother said, 'Lakshya, don't come today, the place is too crowded. Come tomorrow. There'll be fire works,' I did not believe mother. I decided to slip away without Mother's knowledge and go on my own to the fair.

After Mother left for Latur, I did not go to tend the sheep that day. I slipped out of the house and set out to Latur on my own.

While I was crying to go with Mother, she had given me two annas in the morning. They were in my shirt-pocket. A bullock-cart of a Yellamma was going to Latur. I followed it. I did not know where the fair was. There was a person from Bembada in the cart. I asked him in a whisper, '*Karbhari*[27], I want to go to the fair. Which road leads to it?' 'Go straight, a

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[26]*Mang* : A scheduled caste. Traditionally scavengers and butchers.
[27]*Karbhari* : Gentleman.

little ahead a road goes to the north, turn there,' he said.

I took the path shown by him and walked on patiently. I thought Latur would be only a little different from Dhanegaon; but when I reached Latur, I saw rows after rows of houses, wherever my eyes reached. I saw roads teeming with persons, cycles, rickshaws, buses. In the Rokdoba Fair, in our village, I had seen toy-buses. I always tried to imagine how people sat in buses, how buses carried people. I was immensely pleased to see a real bus in Latur.

My mouth watered with desire to eat *bhajis, jeelebis,* which I saw in a hotel. I saw a boy working smartly and rapidly in that hotel; he was my age. I felt that mother should get me such a job in a hotel instead of sending me to school or asking me to look after our sheep. Then I would be able to eat *bhajis* and *jeelebis* to my heart's content.

After seeing the fair I wandered all over the place. I could see no man from our village, nor could I find mother's hotel where she sold milk. Wherever I went, all cement roads looked alike. I was totally baffled. I began to cry as I roamed the roads calling for my mother. People on the way began to remark: 'Look at that boy, he's lost his way. What village is he from?'

By then it had been discovered at home that I had gone to the fair alone. It was feared that I would be lost in Latur, so Dada came to the town.

Somebody told Dada that a boy had lost his way and was wandering about. So Dada ran to More's hotel and told mother, 'Lakshman has come to Latur. We'll have to find him.'

So Dada and mother searched for me long and late. But they could not find me.

More, the hotel-owner told mother to get an announcer to move through all the parts of the town and announce loudly: 'A boy from Dhanegaon has strayed and is not being found. Whoever finds him may please bring him to More's hotel.'

I was sitting on a stone in Ganjgolai crying. I heard the announcemdent. As soon as I heard the name of More's hotel, I ran up to the announcer. I told him that I was from

Dhanegaon. Then he took me to Mother and Dada.

Mother and Dada began to weep hugging me to their breasts. After they had had their cry, they beat me admonishing, 'Will you again come to Latur like this? You scamp, do you want to die under a bus?' They kept on chiding me thus. I began to cry loudly. So Mother bought me a *chhatak*[28] of *jeelebi*. On returning home at night everybody in the house snubbed me.

Though my mother worked herself to the bone, she barely managed to maintain the family. My father had got a cupboard fixed in the wall. What he kept in that cup-board he alone knew. He had kept it locked with a small lock. My mother, however, kept the valuable things in the earthen pitchers that were arranged one on top of the other in a vertical column or in a salada or a wooden box. All our family belongings amounted to two saladas, a vertical row of about a dozen earthen pitchers, two gun metal *paratis*[29], and a brass pitcher, stolen by Narya and bought by Mother out of her own earnings. The plates and the brass pitcher came out of the saladas only on festive occasions.

Once mother was down with fever. So the milk-selling business stopped. Father sold some sheep and we managed somehow for some days. But soon we found it difficult even to get meagre food. We began to sell our animals one by one just to get something to eat. Even then we did not care to take mother to a dispensary. We only applied sacred ash to her and said, 'Ma is afflicted by an evil Spirit.'

Ma said, 'There is a person at Jawali who knows how to exorcise a spirit. Take me to him.'

We did not have even a couple of rupees to take mother, who had carried the burden of the household on her shoulders, to Jawali!

Anna and Dada begged everyone in the village, but nobody gave them money. So the brass pitcher, which mother had purchased, was taken out. Mother was carried to Latur on Tulshiram's donkey. While setting out Mother said, 'Kesarbai,

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[28]*Chhatak* : About 100 gm.

[29]*Paratis* : Broad brimmed plates.

Kashibai, look after my child with love and care. I'm not sure that I'll come back alive.' I began to weep in my mother's lap. When there was not enough money to take Mother, how could they take me with them? The brass pitcher was sold at Latur and money was raised to buy a railway ticket. Mother and Anna went to Jawali.

Anna returned. Mother was now down with a serious illness. We were going through most difficult days without food. My sisters-in-law used to go to cut grass. With their meagre wages, they could buy a kilo of grain. Gruel was prepared from the grain. We had two aged buffaloes Maini and Jani. We sold their milk and passed our days on empty stomachs.

One day a man came from Jawali and told us that Dhondabai had expired. All the people in the house began to weep and wail. I too bawled and wailed. Everybody drew me close, hugged me and wept.

Dada tried to pawn the two *paratis* and a copper pot to raise money against them. The pots had our names engraved on them; even then they thought that the pots might be stolen property and refused to advance money against them. Dada was furious and said, 'What sort of a village is this! Mother-fuckers! Can't get even an earthern pot against a metal one! I'll go to Latur and sell it.'

Harchanda and I were crying bitterly, we were entreating to be taken with them to see our mother's body for the last time. Tulshiram's mother said to Father, 'Martanda, take the boys with you. Let them see their mother for the last time.' Father said, 'True Gangabai, but I've no money. What can I do? We are selling these plates at Latur to meet the expenses of the journey.'

Father, Dada and Anna went. I was restless with the memory of my mother. So Bhau went to Tulshiram with the *ghangal*[30]. But he too was passing through difficult ways. So Bhau came home, drew me to his neck and wept bitterly.

Dada, Anna and Father returned after some days. They showered love on me as I had now become a poor orphan. I

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[30]*Ghangal* : Bath-tub.

even thought it was better that Mother was dead. Now all would love me.

We slowly recovered from our grief over Mother 's death. Her death, however, brought us difficult days. We could not keep the wolf from the door . When Mother was there, she held the reins of the household affairs. Now everybody began acting as the *karta*[31] of the house. Father sold a buffalo. That stared a quarrel between Father and Dada. Dada said to our father, 'You cannot manage the affairs of the household, I'll manage them.' We began to pass through even more difficult days. It became difficult even to get one meal a day.

The gang of thieves is a group of eight ten persons. One of these looks after the property of all the members of the gang and another takes care of the cooking. The others go with the pickpocket of the gang.

One man cannot pick pockets successfully. It is a group-operation. There are at least three to four persons accompanying a pickpocket. One keeps a close watch on persons and keeps track of a person who has a good amount of him, and also watches who is buying what. When a person is seen keeping a good amount of money in his pocket, one member of the gang follows him closely.

When the person with money in his pocket mixes in a crowd, the follower signals to his companions. They stealthily come close. If the person with money enters the crowd where there is hectic buying, or where there is a throng of devotees clamouring to go close to the idol, it is a good opportunity. Two members of the gang go ahead and two press close behind and hustle the quarry.

The man who cuts the pocket holds a blade between two fingers. This man quickly cuts the pocket in which the money has been kept, just at the bottom. Then he quickly puts the blade in his mouth underneath his tongue. He puts two fingers in the pocket and takes out the currency notes and passes it on to his companion behind him who quickly takes the money and vanishes.

Then one of the company spits or coughs as a warning to

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[31] *Karta* : Manager.

disperse. The gang instantly disperse and gather at a pre-appointed spot.

If, at times, a suitable person is not found in the crowd to pick a pocket, the gang moves to the bus-stand and they stand in a queue for the bus, distributing themselves in different parts of the queue.

A couple of the gangsters come to the door of the bus and ligner there without getting into the bus. They neither get into the bus nor get down or step aside. Those behind press forward pushing and shouting: 'Go ahead! Go ahead!' In that commotion some members of the gang pick pockets and disappear.

If ever any one of the gang is discovered and caught, he is cruelly beaten by the mob. As a way out of this, a young boy is taught to cut and pick pockets. If ever he is caught, a couple of persons belonging to the gang, who are close by his side, begin to beat him first. They fist and kick him. They beat him so much that people around think that they are policemen in plain clothes. While beating the boy they abuse him: 'Bastard, you steal eh? You're such a small boy and pick pockets, eh?' Thus they attract the attention of the people. Then one of the gang steps forward and says, 'Leave him saab. He has been beaten quite severely. The child's young, let him go'. Thus the boy's release is secured. Sometimes they make a show of taking him to a police station and then leave him near some lane to disappear.

The people of our commuity from Bhadgaon were quite shrewd. Whenever the police came to make arrests, they ran away and hid themselves in fields and caves. The women of the household, of course, knew their hiding places. They send food, mostly *bhakaris*. When the police came to Bhadgaon to carry out a search, the women acted furious and shouted, 'Oh saab! Nobody's in the house; you have no business to come in.' Even then the police would thrash the womenfolk, grilling them to find out the hiding places of their husbands. When the police entered the houses beating and shouting at women, the dogs tied near the doors would bark and attack them. This caused serious obstruction in their search. The

harassed angry police then would come early at dawn, arrest everybody and thrash even children mercilessly.

Sometimes Namdeo, Tukaram of Bhadgaon and our Dada and Anna went to the river pretending to go fishing. They would watch the lambs and goats grazing by the river and catch a good, fat one from among them.

One day Dada caught quite a fat lamb and pierced its tongue with a thorn to keep it from bleating loudly. Then he dragged it downstream and threw it into the water. He then proceeded to press that live lamb underneath the water, and held it fast between his thighs. He began to move by the side of the river pretending to catch fish. The shepherd saw him. Fortunately the lamb was completely under water and the shepherd did not suspect anything. Dada came home at night with the dead lamb. He cut the lamb and distributed the pieces.

All the children who studied with me in the school were always clean and tidy. I alone used to be dirty and slovenly. The teacher used to say, 'Stand up those who have not taken a bath or is not wearing, washed clothes.' I alone used to stand up. The teacher sometimes used to beat me and on some occasions he would make me do sit-ups. This forced me to take a bath every day. I felt uncomfortable and sad because of this. Sometimes to avoid beatings at the hands of the teacher, I used to wet only the *kargota*[32] and show it to the teacher saying, 'Look Guruji, I've taken a bath today, my *kargota* is wet.'

On a holiday I would go to the river. First I would wash the shirt and dry it. I would take off my shorts only after the shirt was dry. I could not remove both my shirt and my shorts and wash them naked. Women used to be at the river and I felt shy and awkward. I had only one pair of shorts so I used to wind the shirt round my waist and take off the shorts, and wash them. I never got soap to wash with. My soap was the sticky mud of the Ingle-lake by the side of the river. I used to wash my shirt and shorts with that mud. Clothes washed clean with it.

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[32]*Kargota* : A string wound around the waist.

When I went to the school, the boys in my class sniggered at me. They mocked derisively : 'Lakshya, Patharut boy, has come to school!' I used to sit in a corner meekly as if I had been forcibly dragged there. Balachari Guruji used to write numbers, one... two... on my slate and I would run my pencil over them repeatedly for practice. Some of the boys in the school used to call me Lachhmantata and taunt me, 'Lachhmantata, crab-curry *khataa*[33].

Since then everybody in the school called me Lachhmantata. But I did not fell piqued. For I believed that because I belonged to the Parhrut clan, a lower clan, they were privileged to mock at me. I did feel angry sometimes. But I kept quiet. If I told anybody at home, they abused me soundly. They chided me, 'If you want to learn, go to school, otherwise tend cattle.'

Sometimes when father came home, he asked me to tell him what I had learnt. I used to sing for him in a loud voice, the National Anthem — *Jan-Gan-Man-Adhi-Nayak-Jay-He*. Then I used to recite the tables. Father used to be very happy and say, 'My boy has become very wise. He'll be a teacher.'

Father boasted in our community that his son was the cleverest. But the others from our community would say, 'What's there in a school? Better learn thieving!' I too felt that if I began thieving, I would be able to live a better life. I would be able to visit any fair. I wished. But the thought of cruel beatings and torture on arrest would make me feel that schooling was a better proposition.

Our neighbours, however, were in a way envious of my going to school and nagged my father, 'Martanda, teach Laxman our thieving skills. What's the use of schooling for him?'

Once people from Bhadgaon had approached father to lend me to them for thieving. They had said, 'Martanda, give us Laxman to work in our gang. We shall teach him to pick pockets in a year. Your will be full of pleasure. There'll be plentiful earnings.

But Father had firmly resolved that he would send his

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[33]*Khata* : Eats.

Laxman to school to get educated. That was how I came to be educated, othewise I too would have been a thief and led the usual life of our community.

When I passed the first year and began to study in the second class (year) of the school, my Guruji often beat me for I had no text books. I told father so often that I was fed up. At last father took an advance from his master and went to Latur. I had given father a list of books which I had obtained from Guruji. Father went to Latur and bought a text book, a note-book and a pen. That day I moved about exultantly and smartly with the pen clipped in the button-hole of my shirt.

Father warned: 'Take care of the book and the note-book, otherwise I'll thrash you.' Once, when he had come from Chamle's farm to fetch *bhakar,* he asked me, 'Are you taking care of the books properly? Show them to me.' Father saw the note-book and began to beat me with his *chappal.* He neither allowed nor gave me time to say anything. He kept on saying: 'Why did you spoil the note-book? Were you given the pen to dirty the book?' He kept on kicking me and striking me with his fists. It was too much for me, so my brother intervened. I ran to him and threw myself in his arms. He came to my rescue.

Father abused him also. 'The bastard has spoiled the new note-book. Didn't I take an advance from the master and buy it for him? He has scribbled in the note-book with the pen!' Then my brother said, 'The pen is for writing—writing in the note book.' But father did not believe him. He asked the carpenter's son who had studied in school. He also said, 'Your son has written down dictation from the book in the note-book.' Then Father relented and said, 'I beat you foolishly, don't cry now.'

I seldom used to clean my teeth. But since I read a lesson in the school, I began to clean my teeth and wash my face daily.

The women in our house used to bring water and pour it in an earthern jar. The jar used to hold about five-six *ghagars* of water. Sometimes it used to be my turn to wash the earthern jar. While washing I used to find fleas, small frogs,

loam and sticks at the bottom. We drank water with all these in the jar. Nobody ever felt that water for drinking should be clean and fresh.

Since I began going to school, I made it a practice to wash the earthern jar every Sunday, sweep the house clean; and advised my sisters-in-law to live clean. They used to get annoyed. 'Tell that to your Guruji in the school, don't teach us,' they grumbled. When there were hard days, everybody in the house went out for work. All used to be out during the day. Then I used to collect the dung of cows and buffaloes from the street and plaster our hut clean with it, applying it smoothly all over the floor. When all returned from work, my father used to give me a pat on the back and say, 'Laxman has plastered the floor today.' I thought that if I kept the house clean, the women in the house would likewise keep it clean. But the effect was quite the opposite. The women used to clean and apply dung once a fortnight on full moon and new moon days. That also they stopped now. They used to say, 'Let's go to work. Laxman has no school tomorrow, he will plaster the floor with dung and clean the house.'

Once preparations were being made for the 15th August function. 15th August was a day of celebration for our school. I said to our Dhimdhime Guruji, 'Guruji, I want to make a speech.' Dhimdhime Guruji loved me. He always admired my efforts in a way, for only one boy from the Pathrut clan had ever taken the trouble to learn in a school. Dhimdhime Guruji himself was a Mahar by caste. He told me, 'Make a speech. I'll include your name among the speakers.' I was very happy. I prepared for the speech by reading the lessons on Gandhiji and Jawaharlal Nehru.

Dhimdhime Guruji announced that a boy from the school was going to address the audience. Afterwards, Patil, the Chief Guest, was to deliver a speech. Guruji signalled me to go to the dais. I had said I would make a speech. But I trembled with nervousness when I saw all the people of the village gathered there. As it was I was afraid even to pass by the Sarpanch and the Patil of the village. Now the very thought of making a speech before them made me tongue-tied. Even

then I somehow mustered up courage and straightaway went and stood near the flag. All the dignitaries of the village were sitting on chairs before me. I stood in front of them and spoke:

'All teachers from our school and respected people of our village, and my brothers and sisters; today in the morning we had a rally through the village because our country became free on this day. Mahatma Gandhi and Pandit Nehru made our country free for us in 1947. We must guard that freedom.'

As I was saying these lines, my hands and feet trembled with nervousness. I had crammed this up. I could not remember anything else. And I sat down.

That Pathurat's Lakshya had made a speech and had also sung in the rally was all over the village. Then I too felt that I had become wise. Father came to know that I had made a speech. He encouraged me, 'Now go ahead with your schooling, I shall buy you a cycle, if I can pay off the advance I have taken and if I can save some money after the payment.' I felt that if I passed that year, I would at least get employed as a policeman or a peon.

Now my schooling was going on very well. But at home we were nearly starving. Sometimes for four-five days there was no cooking in the house.

Sometimes, we cooked broken or coarsely ground grain, mostly it was *milo* (cheap grain). There were too many mouths to feed at home. We used to prepare watery gruel of coarsely ground *milo* in a big pot. At intervals we got a kilo of *milo* from a ration shop. We used to coarse-grind it. It would be full of worms and insects, but we used to be so hungry that we greedily drank that hot insect-ridden gruel without ever bothering to filter off the insects.

Each one received four large spoons of that thin gruel. I used to drink my gruel and also receive some from the shares of Anna or Bhau. Hence I never sat for meals alone without them. I used to keep watch and when Anna and Bhau sat for their gruel, I sat with them. My sisters-in-law did not like it. They got angry because I ate from their husbands' shares, but I used to remain sitting with Anna and Bhau like a shameless

fellow. When Bhau and Anna did not give me from their share, I used to lick my hands after rubbing them on the plate, and then lick the plate with my tongue. I used to stare at Bhau's and Anna's greadily. So even when they were hungry, they angrily offered me some gruel from their shares, muttering, 'Lakshimanya is like a curse.' Even then my hunger would not be fully satisfied. I used to scrape whatever was stuck at the bottom of the pot and eat it. I never got even a single full meal a day.

Father took his meals at Chamle's. I being the youngest in the house, father used to call me to the farm where he worked. He shared half his *bhakar* with me, going half-hungry himself.

Father had given me the duty of bringing his meals (*bhakar*) from Chamle's house after school. I had wanted just such an opportunity.

Half starved I used to carry father's meals to him from Chamle's home I still remember Chamle's food. When I went to Chamle's place to bring Father's meals, Kisanmai gave with a generous hand. She looked after Father very well. She gave buttermilk in a jar, vegetable curry to eat *bhakar* with in another bowl and *bhakar* tied in a piece of cloth.

I used to set out with this food to the farm where Father worked. From the vegetable in the bowl came an enticing smell. When I saw those white *jowar bhakars* and buttermilk, my belly would be roused with desire and my mouth would water. My conscience told me that the *bhakar* given was just enough for my father. My belly, on the other hand, was all afire with hunger; moreover, never did we get such delicious *bhakar* and vegetable at home.

I used to be so eager to reach the shepherd's *panand*[34] that I wished I could instantly fly there, and eat *bhakar*. On reaching the *panand* I looked about and inserted two fingers into the bundle in which the *bhakar* was tied and pulled out a piece of the *bhakar* and put it into my mouth. I used to stir the vegetable-curry in the bowl with a stick and drink a little of it. I tasted so delicious that I felt like eating all the *bhakars*

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[34]*Panand* : A public path between the boundaries of village forms.

and the vegetable-curry. But there was also the nagging feeling that Father would remain hungry.

If a piece was broken off from the full *bhakar*, it would be seen easily that someone had eaten a part of the *bhakar*. So I used to break the full *bhakar* into quarter pieces. Then I used to wipe my mouth clean to leave no tell-tale evidence. It was thus that I would go to Chamle's farm and call my father loudly: Father! Father!

If father had been irrigating the farm all morning, he would be very hugry. Hearing me call, he would stop his work and sit to eat. Then he would say to me, "Laxman, what was prepared for meals at home?" I would reply: "A little corn-gruel. Father would offer me half a *bhakar* and some vegetable-curry in a plate. Thus here also I got something to eat. Father never suspected that I might have eaten some of the food on the way. He never asked Chamle's wife why he sometimes received scanty fare. So I got some of my father's share. But I wondered if I would ever get a full satisfying meal.

Chamle's sons came to school with groundnuts and salted nuts in their pockets. They ate outside the class during recess. I used to beg them to give me some. On such occasions I wondered why God did not grant me birth in Chamle's home. Then I too would have received good things to eat and decent shirts and pants to wear. In our home we had to go half starved all the year round.

In *Ashadha-Shravana*[35] we did not get *bhakar* at all. Then we would pluck leaves of sweet-potatoes from the farm where Father used to work. We used to boil the leaves, throw out the water and grind the leaves into a paste, and make *mutke-kotbale*[36] of it. For many, many days we lived on this. We would completely denude sweet-potato plants and leave the farm a leafless desert. Because we took away leaves, Father's landlord abused and scolded him and made him sit home for eight days. Father could not say a word in protest when he saw us taking the leaves of the sweet-potato plants, because he

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[35]*Ashadha - Shravana* : According to the Hindu calendar months - around July - August.

[36]*Mutke Kotbale* : Cutlets.

knew that we were starving at home.

So Father told his master the truth that his sons took the leaves to cook and eat. This resulted in his suspension from work for eight days, for taking leaves which even animals do not eat readily.

When sweet-potato leaves were no more available, we starved almost to death. Nobody from the village gave us work. Father had already taken things on credit from shops, So we could not get anything from the shops. Finally we would be forced to eat all sorts of leaves: leaves of *gadhav kata, tarvata, kurdu, dagdi, shepu,* carrot and such other wild plants. We felt gratified even if we could get these. We often suffered from loose motions because we ate too many of these leaves.

There was a time when even such leaves were scarce, as we were passing through a period of drought. Once my elder sister-in-law had brought *kurdu* leaves. We had had no food for four days and we fried these leaves on an iron pan. There was no oil, so the leaves were fried by putting a little salt on them. My sister-in-law gave us all our shares. Even those *kurdu* leaves without anything to go with them tasted so delicious that I craved for more and still more.

After giving us our shares, my sister-in-law kept Kesar vahini's share in a small bowl in a niche in the wall. Then she went out to collect fuel from rubbish heaps. Seeing that there was nobody at home, I stealthily went to the niche. I could not reach it, so I put a basket underneath, and standing on it I took some vegetable out of the bowl and ate it. Unfortuately, my sister-in-law arrived just then and saw me in the act. She had a piece of wood in her hand, which she had pulled out of a bamboo-hedge. She shouted at me angrily, "You dirty vagabond, you bastard! You've eaten Kesar's share also.' She gave me three or four lusty strokes on my buttocks. I began to howl loudly.

By then Kesarvahini had returned from her work. she had received half a *bhakar* from the house where she had retouched the grind-stone. The two sisters-in-law ate the *bhakar* and the vegetable all the time looking at me. I too stared at them greedily, hoping to receive a morsel. But they

did not give me anything. At night I complained to Dada and Anna of their behaviour. Dada would beat his wife, I had complained with much distortion and exaggeration, but in vain.

Sometimes hunger gnawed at my intestines so much that I went in search of offerings made to evils spirits. In the month of *Shravan* on full moon days and new-moon days parents made offerings of food and coconuts to propitiate evil spirits, if their children were seriously ill. Such offering were found in cremation yards, supposedly the haunt of evil spirits.

Nobody dared eat the coconuts and food offered to evil spirits. But my belly being all afire with hunger, I did not bother about spirits and ghosts. I used to kick the coconut thrice and take the food. The top of the food offered to evil spirits was smeared with oil and black soot. I did not feel like throwing away even such offerings. I scraped away the blackened part of the food, sat under a tree in a farm and ate it. I used to break the coconut and eat the kernel. But I always offered a small piece of the coconut and a little portion of the food to evil spirits to propitiate them lest they haunt me. Only after eating the food did I go home. I believed the ghost came with one stuck to one's feet; so I used to wash my feet before entering the hut.

On one occasion we lived only on water for eight or nine days. Father borrowed an anna and bought a *chhatak* of jaggery and mixed it with water in a pot and gave a cup of the jaggery-water to each of us — Dada, Bhau, sister-in-law, Harchanda, me, Kesarvahini — and took one himself. On these days I used to put my arms round Father's neck and weep bitterly for food. I used to make rounds of rubbish heaps and search for dried mango stones and tamarind seeds, collect them, and roast them and eat them. Sometimes Dada and Father used to visit other villages and steal a pig. We roasted and ate it. Sometimes when I was hungry and there was nothing to eat, I used to spread salt on the grind-stone and lick it avidly for whatever flour was stuck there.

On the days of acute starvation Dada, Bhau, Anna, Narya Tulsiram, Bhima, went to distant places, searched for a farm

with a good standing crop and stole full ears of wheat, jowar and bajra, chillis and groundnuts. The loot was distributed during the night.

Fearing that a farmer might find the stolen loot with us, we used to beat the stolen ears, separate the grain, make a fire and roast the gain that remained in the bucket. We took care not to leave anything behind as tale-tell evidence and burnt all the husk. All the people (young and old) in the hug woke up in the dead of night, and after the grain was roasted thoroughly the women ground it. In the meanwhile, I would fetch a pot filled with water and keep it on the fire to boil. Then the coarse-ground grain would boil into a soft thick gruel. Thus we would satisfy our three-four days old hunger with a little quantity of the boiled grain.

But my hunger was even then not fully satisfied. So I would get up in the morning and pick and eat the particles that had popped out of the pot while the grain was being boiled, and eat those caked-with-mud morsels.

On occasions I had gone without *bhakar* for two or more months at a stretch. Sometimes farmers, who stayed on farms to guard their crops were disturbed in their sleep and woke up while we were stealing. On such occasions Tulshiram imitated the hoots of owls and the yelping of foxes so that the farmers did not suspect the presence of thieves; and waited till the farmers went back to sleep again and silence was restored. Then we proceeded with our business of stealing.

One night, our gang had gone to steal something from a farm at Shivani, a village. Farmers saw them plucking ears of the grain-crop. They began to shout: 'Thieves! Thieves!' and started hurling stones at the gang with their slings. So all the persons of the gang fled throwing down the plucked ears. Dada, however, conscious that all the persons at home were starving and anxiously waiting for him to bring something to eat began to run with the load of plucked ears and as a result lagged behind the others. A stone, hurled through the sling, crashed into his head. He was hurt very badly. Even so, unmindful of the deep wound, he kept on running with the load of ears. After they were a safe distance away from the

farm, Tulshiram and Sambha, with the help of a flint, made some fire and in its light searched for and brought *jakam jodicha pala*[37] and pressed it into his wound and dressed it with a ragged piece of cloth.

On reaching home Dada's *dhoti*, which had smears of blood all over, was washed clean by *bhabhi*[38] in the night (to leave no clue). We were all glad that Dada had returned home. Had he been caught, he would have been beaten to death.

People of our fraternity from Bhadgaon never starved. They did brisk business and collected enough for a decent living. Hence there was close competition among our tribesmen to give their daughters in marriage to versatile thieves from Bhadgaon. Such a marriage assured a good, comfortable life for their daughter. In fact, versatile eligible thieves from Bhadgaon, Kavatha, Salgara, Solapur, were ever sought as good prospective husbands. This is why these towns are known as *Uchalyacha*[39] Kavata, Uchalyacha Bhadgaon.

People from our village indulged in large-scale thieving only in *Ashadh-Shravan*. In other months some went begging and others on grind-stone retouching business. My brother Manik Dada and Narya, who was purchased by Tulshiram, were the only two trained in the art and craft of thieving.

Sambha, Bhima, Pandurang of our fraternity had donkeys. They used to go on a fortnightly trip to retouch grind-stones. They earned well in this business. Our lane appeared well-crowded on their return from such trips. There used to be donkeys and dogs everywhere, causing quite a hubbub. When they were on their trips, the lane appeared disconcertingly deserted.

When Sambha, Tulshiram, Pandurang, Linga, returned from their business trips, we spent our nights gossiping with them. Tulshiram and Sambha often boasted that in their business trips they had plenty of good food to eat. They talked of the number of marriage feasts they had enjoyed. They spoke of Gangubai of Shivani Town, and how she gave

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[37] *Jakham Jodicha Pala* : A kind of herb used for stopping the flow of blood.
[38] *Bhabhi* : brother's wife.
[39] *Uchalyacha* : Of the Uchale - a community notified as criminals.

them a jarful of pure unadulterated butter-milk and the previous day's *bhakars*, and of Sevanta of Ramjanpur, who gave them a fully satisfying meal of *chapatis* for working on only one mill-stone.

Whenever I heard of these tales, my mouth watered with desire. I felt like skipping school and going with Tulshiram on these trips. Tulshiram purposely boasted to us, knowing full well our famished condition.

I, together with Tulshidas, Sambha, Narya, Tukya, always attended marriage feasts or funeral feasts, wherever they might be. I used to skip school and accompany them to these feasts. Tukya, Panchafuli, Hanma, and I always kept a close watch on the nearby villages — Ramjanpur, Vmarga, Shivani, Bhusani, Bhabalgaon, Bhatkheda. If there were no marriage feasts, there were village feasts (held for one reason or the other); we noted these and informed all the people of our fraternity: 'Look, there is a feast to-day at such and such place.' Then all of us — men, women, children — took our pots, bowls, whatever other containers were available and walked eight-nine miles to the place of the feast.

On these days we were careful not to drink water. Tulshiram used to advise : 'Children, don't drink water. If you drink water, you cannot eat well.' Not drinking water for a couple of days, we would be hungry, and this would give us hiccups, but still we did not drink water.

Walking through mud and thorns our feet hurt sorely. If a thorn pierced deep into the flesh, it pained as if life itself was being drained out. We only thought of when we would reach the place, and how much we would eat. With feet burning and aching we fell on the food and ate till we almost brought it up.

Once there was the wedding of the son of the Patil of Bhuani. *Bundi*[40] was being served in the wedding feast. People from two-three villages around had been invited. We all went together. We sat and ate our fill in the first round of the feast. Then we continued to sit at the subsequent rounds. At every round we pocketed the *bundi* served at the feast. Then we met

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[40]*Bundi* : A popular sweetmeat item in marriage feasts.

Tukya at the spot outside the village and handed over the collected *bundi*. We repeated this through two-three rounds collecting a good amount of *bundi*.

We felt rather guilty that we were eating at the feast, while those at home were starving. So we thought of collecting some *bundi* for them also, and kept on collecting as much as we could.

One of the servers suspected me. He kept a watch on me and when I sat in the line once again, he held me by the ears and gave me two-three resounding slaps on the face shouting at me, 'What village are you from? Is it your father's food? How many times have you been sitting to eat? He beat me and threw me out of the dining hall.

I wailed "No, I'll not do it again."

He cursed at me, "Fuck his mother, the bastard, don't know what Mahar, Mang caste he belongs to! He has polluted the feast by his unholy attendance and come and ate through two-three rounds."

The others at the feast asked the server to let me alone. It was not good to make a row over food they said. Only then did the man let me go.

I went out of the village crying. When I was caught and being beaten, the others of our gang had run away. They were not waiting for me outside the village. They feared I might disclose their names and all the *bundi* we had collected might be taken away. So they were waiting some three-four furlongs away. I searched for them and finally met them. I was weeping all the time. I had to find them quickly because I feared that Tukya and Sambha might run away with my share of the *bundi*.

Tulsiram shouted at me, "Lakshya, don't you have brains? Don't you know that one person serves food through a round? Why didn't you sit at the next round? Did you have to sit at the same round twice? That's why I told your father not to send you to school. You'll always remain a simpleton. Look at my Tukya, how smart and agile he is! He is never caught anywhere. Only merchants and brahmins go to school. We cannot make a living unless we roam around and

keep visiting new villages and towns. O.K. forget it. Whatever happens you must not disclose our names. We thought you would tell our names and get us beaten up with you."

All of us — Sambha, Tukya, Tulshiram — came close to our village. We took our shares of *bundi* and went to our houses. Everybody gathered round the *bundi* I had brought as dogs do round a carcass they have sighted. They finished off the *bundi* in a matter of minutes.

Eating such food that we rarely got, I began to crave for it. I did not care if I was cursed, beaten and thrown out; I ceased to feel ashamed of such humiliation. I would do anything to get even a little tidbit.

In Dhanegaon the Mhaskes and the Chamles gave the village-folk ritual meals in honour and memory of their ancestors. We used to be present at such meals. We had formed a gang that regularly went to these meals. Me, Tukya, Narya, Kerya, carried plates. One of us used to keep watch. He used to find out when the meals were being served to guests. As soon as it was known that the meals were being served, we ran fast to the spot.

While the guests were having meals in the house, we stationed ourselves close by and stared at them greedily. Whenever we saw a person running with a full-loaded plate and serving food, we used to wail and beg : 'Karbhari, give us some food.' We wailed loudly in the hope that the people dining inside might hear our wails and ask someone to throw some scraps at us just to keep us quiet. So we kept on howling: 'Give us some food.'

Dogs barked and we wailed. Dogs also crowded with us for food to lick the left overs from the thrown-out *patravali*[41]. When the diners had had their food and left the hall, someone from among them would say, 'Oh there, throw these Pathruts some food.' Then we used to get half a *roti* and some vegetable in a bowl. Sometimes they would throw us the leftovers from the *patravalis* of the diners. We collected the *patravali* and ate there right on the street. But sometimes they attacked us, brandishing sticks and abused us and drove us away.

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[41] *Patravali* : Dining plates made of leaves of *Palas* tree.

Thus hankering after food made me miss school quite often and Balacharya Guruji beat me severely. Things went on in this way and it was time for the Fourth Standard Board Examination. I used to think then that, whether I studied further or not, I had to get through the Fourth Standard Examination, so that I might secure employment either as a police constable or a peon. So I studied very hard. I wished I could get into government service.

Sopan, the father of Babusha, was a versatile pick-pocket. His fourth wife was equally adroit in thieving. Her name was Yellava. In a way Sopan was a son-in-law of our family. Our sister was given to him in marriage. So we were quite closely related and associated. Sopan and his wife earned quite well. Sopan wore a silk turban and also wore rings on his fingers. Yellava cut necklaces, *mangalsutras* and other trinkets very skilfully with her teeth. She was extremely smart and agile. On every round of thieving she collected about one-to-two *chhataks* of gold. Sometimes on their way back Sopan and Yellava visited us and stayed with us for a few days. They used to tell us that if they went back to their village, the police would come to them. So they sold the stolen gold and shared the booty with us.

Whenever Yellava came to our hut, she brought a big bundle. That big bundle bulged with many bundles stolen from various places. It contained *saris*, *chaddars*, *blouses*, *dhotis*. We used to buy from these collections and in turn sell to people of our fraternity. People from the village used to learn of her arrival. They also used to buy *chaddars*, *dhotis*, *saris*. A *sari* cost rupees five to six. All clothes used to be old clothes. I don't remember seeing new clothes being bought when we were living at Dhanegaon. Clothes used to be bought only from such thieves. That is why our relatives from Jawali were well-off, they were a support to us. When we received their old clothes, I wore them and strutted about like a hero.

Anna, Dada, Bhau had prepared to leave on a usual thieving mission. I said to Manikdada, 'Take me with you. You are going to Tuljapur for thieving and my school is also closed. Let me go with you to bow in obeisance and pay my

respects to the Goddess.' Anna said. 'You're a school-going boy. If you're caught by the police, you'll be removed from school. Your name will be entered in the police records as a thief.'

But I was indifferent to these arguments. I only knew that I got good things to eat when I accompanied them on thieving trips. So I cried and pestered them to take me.

So, I, Manikdada, Sambha, Bhau, Anna, Bhagwan set out to the Tuljapur Fair. On the day of departure, Bhau stole a cock, and I bought a Bharat blade from Govind Patil's shop. Bhau cut the cock with the blade. Its blood was sprinkled on everybody's passes and the family Goddess. All bowed in respect before the blade, the passes and Goddess, and prayed : 'O Mother goddess, Tulja Bhavani! Bless us with success in our thieving mission! Bless us with valuable things!' We also prayed and bowed in obeisance before the basket and the beads of the Goddess and set out on the mission.

We came to the Latur Railway Station to travel by rail. We met a police constable who knew Dada. Dada was a well-known thief in Latur. The policeman asked Dada, 'Where the hell are you going, Mankya?' Dada was struck dumb at this question. In the meanwhile, Bhagwan, Anna, Sambha, Bhau, hid themselves in latrines. I stood away with the bundle. Dada replied: 'I'm going to my relatives at Jawali.' The policeman retorted: 'You bastard, you're telling me a lie. You're going to the Tuljapur Fair by this train. Where are your cronies? Are you going to give me something or shall I take you to the police station? Dada begged, 'Please don't, I'm only going to Jawali.' The policeman questioned him: 'You bastard, yesterday a purse containing a thousand rupees was picked at the bus-stand, who took it? Somebody from your gang has taken it.' Dada begged and pleaded piteously and gave the policeman thirty rupees from his pocket. The policeman then said, 'Alright Mankya, go, but meet me again. You're trying to get away paying so little, mind you.' The policeman then let him go.

My hands and legs were trembling with fear. I thought that my name would go into police records and I would be

thrown out of school. I feared that Dada might be arrested.

Dada asked me where Sambha and Bhagwan had gone. At that moment Bhagwan, Anna, Bhau came out of the latrines. The train also arrived and we got into it hurriedly. Still there was a lurking fear that some other police constables might see us. So we sat in the last bogie farthest from the engine. We arrived at Edshi and from there made our way to Tuljapur.

Dada was very pleased to see the dense crowd milling around. Like us, many other thieves had arrived there and with the same purpose as ours. Santaram-Bhauji from Jawali was there. Sambha-Bhau took me to pay obeisance to Goddess Tuljamai. Manikdada, Bhagwan, Anna were already moving about in the crowd. Sambha Bhau kept a watch on the bundles of the visitors to the fair. I was made to stand in a distant corner to take charge of and look after the stolen bundles. Bhau went to the temple and came with a new pair of chappals. He asked me to put it into a bundle immediately. By then Dada had also picked a purse, containing 250 rupees, from a bus-stand. Anna had brought four-five pairs of chappals, a pair of shoes and two shoulder-bags. In those bags we found *saris*, *dhotis* and *chaddars*.

Then we went to the temple to take a bath in the temple tank in which water poured through a cow-mouthed opening. There we saw many women from well-to-do families taking a bath. We saw piles of gold ornaments around their necks. We began our search for an opportunity there.

At one place all women had removed their ornaments: necklaces, lockets and other trinkets, tied them in a piece of cloth and kept them under a basket. They had asked an old woman to sit on the basket while they had gone to take a bath.

Now our Dada became restless. The old woman was sitting on the basket; she would not move. Dada and Anna could not think of a trick to steal those ornaments. At that time our brother-in-law Santaram of Jawali came there. Yellava was with him. Dada informed Santaram that there were ornaments under the basket on which the old woman was sitting.

Bhavaji (Santaram) began to ponder over the problem:

'What was to be done?' He brought a kilo of *pedhes* (sweetmeat). He signalled to us. We went near the old woman and stood around her in a crowd. Santaram began to distribute the *pedhes*. Dada, Bhau, Anna began to shout: 'Give me! Give me.' People gathered round Santaram and received *pedhes* from him; but the old woman would not move.

Immediately Santaram got a change for a hundred rupee in fivers and began to drop the notes one by one near the old woman. The old woman saw a note dropped but sat still. Santaram walked a little ahead and dropped another note and then yet another. When the third note was dropped, the old woman got up from the basket and began to pick up the notes. As the old woman proceeded to pick up the notes, Dada and Santaram's wife quickly lifted the basket and picked the bundle of ornaments. The old woman picked up the currency notes sat on the basket as before.

By then the women had returned from their bath. The old woman said, 'Oh my daughters, Goddess Bhawanimai blessed me. I received treasure.' The women, while changing their saris asked, 'What did you get?'

After changing they asked the old woman to get up from the basket so that they could take their ornaments. The bride among them put her hand under the basket. There was nothing. They all began to beat their breasts and tear their hair and howl. The old woman began to put dust in her mouth and wail; 'The bastard dropped five-rupee notes and deceived me!' They all began to wail and weep loudly.

Santaram murmured, 'Let us go. The theft is known to all now.' As we had picked up an unusually bountiful treasure, instead of going to the station, we walked to a distant field and sat under a tree. We untied the bundle, gave Santaram and his wife, Yellava, their share. Both were pleased to receive it, for it was Santaram who had used his imagination and got the ornaments picked.

Santaram was very clever. He was well-versed in all the ways of this profession. He wore snow-white clothes and a red silk turban. He always kept in his pocket lemon, turmeric powder, vermillion powder, frankincense, needles, marking

nuts and cowrie shells. He applied *Bhasma*[42] across his forehead. He did all this just to throw suspicion off him in case he got caught while a theft was in progress. He wanted people to take him for a learned person; and in fact he did impress people with his personality. If he was ever caught at fairs, and his pockets were searched, the things found in them made people think that he was learned in the ways of black magic, and they left him alone fearing that he might practise *bhanamati*[43] on them.

Then we decided to go to Jawali. On arrival at Jawali we distributed the shares of our earnings. Santaram killed a pig, and brought liquor. Manikdada, Bhau and Anna forced me to drink some liquor advising me that it was good for health and kept away cough. Then Santaram gave Dada two necklaces and a ring in a rough estimate of his share. We were pleased with whatever we received, and returned with a good loot.

Manikdada said to Father, 'Laxman brought success. He is lucky.'

Father, however, promptly rejected Dada's remarks and said, 'Only the three of you may go on thieving trips, let him go to school! Turning to me he said, 'Look Laxman, you don't go again with them. You may go in the vacation. Don't ever miss school.'

Since Dada, Harchanda and Annabhau started going on thieving missions, many people of our fraternity from various places visited us. They distributed the shares among themselves at our place. Sometimes there were serious disagreements which ended in violent quarrels and bloody fights.

If anyone of the gang, without informing his cronies, picked a pocket and took the stolen money away or passed it on to his household, the *talange* (Patils) of our community and thieving gangs came together to adjudicate upon the affair. Since we were the *talange* in our village, the Patils from other places and gangs assembled at our house.

The Panchayat used to be convened on the farm of

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[42]*Bhasma* : Sacred ash.

[43]*Bhanamati* : Witchcraft.

Manatatya, a shepherd. There was a mango tree there and also facility for water. When the Panchayat assembled at the shepherd's farm it became a crowded affair with all people milling around. Everybody received travelling expenses and the Patils had to be given either one hundred and one or one hundred fifty-one rupees each as honorarium. All the Patils from our area used to attend. The accused, for whom the panchayat had been called into śession, had to bear all the expenses of liquor, meat, vegetable cutlets, and other items of the Panchayat meals.

The members of the Panchayat would attend the Panchayat session in white dhoti, white shirt and white *uparana*[44]. Then the Panchayat would sit in judgement.

The opinion was frequently divided. Some Panchas would hold the petitioner to be right while the other Panchas would insist that the accused was in the right. This created a confusing situation and as a result there was much argument and hubbub.

Once the Panchayat was in session, it would continue to be in session for three days in a row under the same tree. When at last a unanimous decision was obtained from all the panchas after much debate, and the accused convicted of the guilt, he would be fined. The fine would range from rupees five hundred and fifty to five thousand. If the accused had been convicted of falsehood in their dealings with other members of the gang, he and his treacherous accomplices would be required to go on thieving missions only for their bare living for two to six months as the Panchayat would direct. They would not get their shares of the loot because they had betrayed the professional faith of the gang. Even if the person, so convicted, on his own, stole anything, he had no right over it. If the convicted person refused to pay the fine, he was ostracized.

Once one Shankar from Salgara used his daughter for wife. A large Panchayat sat in judgement. Once it had a session in Salgara, then in Dhanegaon, then again in Bhadgaon. Some of

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[44]Uparana - A long, folded piece of cloth worn round the neck with the ends falling in front.

the patils could not arrive at any conclusive decision.

If the case under consideration was highly complicated and serious, and there was serious disagreement and quarrels, the final Panchayat would go in session at Kavatha. In Kavatha there lived 'a master-kaka' (teacher uncle). He was the first teacher from our community. He would pass judgement and resolve the tangle. The decision taken at the Kavatha-Panchayat was binding on all.

The Panchayat was in session in Kavatha for a fortnight. The Panchayat came to the conclusion that Shankarya had used his daughter as his wife and thereby he had brought shame to the community and spoiled its name. The Panchayat, therefore, ostracized Shankarya and his daughter for two years. Moreover as a punishment it was directed that Shankarya's moustache be shaved with the piss of his daughter, at Kavatha.

If anyone dared to touch, give refuge, or serve meals in a plate to the person ostracized, that relative or person too would be ostracized. Hence the news of an ostracization would be passed on to all the members of our community. We received the message of Shankarya's ostracization at our village. Shankarya visited our village since once after he was ostracized. He was served water in a coconut-shell. Just as patils, *Deshmukhs*[45] keep separate cups and saucers for Mahars and Mags, we also kept separate plates for food and water for the ostracized. For there would always be some person ostracized at a given time. So we also served Shankarya water in a plate. We gave him *rotis* and vegetable in an iron basket generally used while digging trenches. We did not take Shankarya into the house. We gave him a tattered cloth to lie on and a tattered quilt to cover himself. While going away Shankarya took these things with him.

In our community the decision of the Panchayat must be obeyed. Nobody takes amiss the treatment accorded as a result of the Panchayat's directive. Shankarya felt in no way aggrieved or insulted at the treatment given to him. His behaviour with us was quite friendly and normal.

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[45]Deshmukhs : High caste Marathas.

Once we—Bhabhi, Anna, Kesar-Vahini, Dada and myself—had gone to Mahalangra to attend a marriage. A cloud of fear always hung over a marriage in our community and no one knew how it would end or whether the ceremony would be concluded at all. On that day there were two marriages being performed simultaneously in Mahalangra. People were drunk and behaving rowdily. A quarrel started with somebody claiming that he was not received with the proper respect due to him, and that a sari due to his grandmother as a gift of honour was not given. Somehow the quarrel was settled and the marriage ceremony was started.

It was now time to arrange the ritual bath for the bridegroom and the bride. The bath is customarily performed with the sacred ritual of thread-winding. The bathing bowl contains the vermillion turmeric-mixed water. The bowl is custumorily wound with a sacred thread by married women who have not been osctracized. Then four married women pour the water from the bathing bowl on the bodies of the bridegroom and the bride.

Kesarvahini wound the ritual thread. Then our elder sister-in-law Kashibai began to wind the thread round the bowl. As she was about to twist and twine the thread, one of the old headmen, came up and snatched the thread out of her hands. He said that Kashibai's grandmother had run away with a Maratha. As long as her sons were not ritualistically purified and accepted back into the community, the married women from her family would not have the right to perform the thread-winding ceremony. 'So we feel that we have been gravely insulted,' said the headman.

The people from our family declared, 'Our family is pure, untainted.' Then Dada, Anna, Bhau said to Kashibai, 'We have received a tainted woman in our family.' Some of the persons there asked how Kashibai was to be blamed, or how she came into the picture if her grandmother had run away with a Maratha.

To this query a reply was given by Tukaram of Bhadgaon, Murli-Mama of Salgara and Maruti of Whal. They came together and said, 'How do you say such a thing! Kashibai has

taken birth in the womb of the daughter of her grandmother. Hence her birth is tainted.' So the marriage-ceremony was stopped till the matter was settled.

Now the Panchayat of our fraternity held its session and we obstinately held to our point. Dada, Anna, Bhau said, 'We are also headmen and we will not go until we exercise the right of thread-winding!' So all the Panchas deliberated, and the decision was taken in the Panchayat that Kashibai was untainted from her father-in-law's side, though a little tainted from her mother's side. So Kashibai should be fined twenty-one rupees and received in the community as purified. It was declared that there was no other taint in her.

Then father paid twenty-one rupees to the Panchayat, and Kashibai, in the same marriage, wound the ritual thread round the bathing bowl, weeping all the while.

In our community it is permissible for a husband to sever marital relations with the wife at any time. So also a husband is permitted to contract a second marriage. If a husband or a wife is unwilling to continue marital relationship with his or her spouse, he or she is required to reimburse the marriage expenses in the Panchayat settlement. If a husband severs marital relationship with his wife, he has to reimburse whatever the marriage-expense claimed by the wife's father. Conversely, it is the wife who must reimburse the marriage expense claimed by the husband, if she desires to sever the marital relationship. If it is contended by either party that the claim is exorbitant, the Panchayat adjudicates upon the claim, and relieves the contending parties of their marital obligations.

Once Dada, Anna, Bhau and myself had gone with the Bhadgaon gang to the Pandharpur Fair. The Pandharpur Fair on this particular occasion was unusually crowded and an extraordinarily large number of pilgrims were milling and jostling around. All the members of our thieves' community had gathered there. The Pandharpur Fair was nothing short of a grand Divali festival for us. It provided an unfailing opportunity for treasure-hunting and substantial earnings.

In this fair, however, loudspeakers were scattered all over and a warning was being announced frequently that a large

number of pickpockets and petty thieves were moving around and the pilgrims should take care of their pocket and properties. So nobody moved about leaving his property unguarded. Everybody moved around with his hands thrust in his pocket.

The created a difficult situation for us the thieving fraternity. So all began to grumble that there was no earning. Dada had already spent all his money. The gangsters from Bhadgaon were also by then fed up with the situation. All began to fume and fret grumbling that this *Pandhari*[46] was starving them.

Bhauji (Santaram) had applied *gandha*[47] to his forehead and tied a cloth band around his waist and was moving around like a *kirtankar*[48]. Manikdada, Anna, Bhagwan had also worn beads of basil as if they were singers of devotional songs. Some of them had worn sacred threads rounds their necks or across their chests.

At last Santaram bhauji stared a *kirtan*[49] on the bank of the Chandrabhaga. There was no *veena*[50] but he had only cymbals in his hands. Some twenty-five people from our fraternity had gathered there and were beating cymbals and singing devotional songs that were hardly in tune with the beats of the cymbals. Santaram-bhauji sang the devotional song loudly and followed it by an explanatory sermon. While he sang, Dada lightly felt with his fingers the money that was tied in a knot at the waist-line of the *dhoti* of a by-stander. He slit the knot in the strangers dhoti with a Bharat blade. He cut so forcibly, however, that the currency notes as well as some strands of pubic hair dropped into his hands. Dada signalled and vanished.

Santaram stopped his *kirtan*, and all our companions disappeared. Then the people of our fraternity came together at a distant spot. While picking the knot in the strangers *dhoti*, Dada had cut through the currency notes as well as cut off

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[46]*Pandhari* : Vithal, God.
[47]*Gandha* : Sandalwood paste
[48]*Kirtankar* : A religious - preacher-cum-reciter.
[49]*Kirtan* : A religious recitation and preaching.
[50]*Veena* : A Stringed instrument.

some pubic hair. He showed that to us and exclaimed : 'Fuck your mother! Look at this wretched luck! Went to steal money and got this undergrowth. Since all the notes were cut through they were useless. So he gave me the notes.

By now everybody was terribly hungry. No one had money in his pocket. We were all sitting near the Chandrabhaga Bridge. A woman was boiling rice in a large vessel. Her companions had gone to take a holy bath in the Chandrabhaga. The woman was sitting near a *chool*[51] preparing meals. Our Bhauji from Jawali (Santaram) happened to look at the woman preparing the meals. She was boiling rice on the *chool* on a large vessel.

Some of the people from our gang threw a challenge : 'If anyone here boasts of a pure pedigree in the community of thieves, he should steal that large vessel from under the nose of that woman.'

No one was willing to accept the challenge. All began to ponder the problem : How was the vessel to be stolen?

Shantaram-bhauji of Jawali said : 'I'm a pure descendent of the line of the community of thieves. I'll get that vessel in front of the woman. But one of you must assist me.'

So Santaram and Sakharam of Zadgaon made a bet between them. A person of our gang hailing from Jalni went near to the woman. Pretending that he was drunk he sat in front of the woman to piss. So the woman turned her face away from the vessel and began to look in the other direction and began to abuse him. 'Bastard! harlot's pimp, You lift your *dhoti* and piss in front of me!'

While she had turned her face away and was cursing, Santaram quickly ran to the vessel picked it off the fire-place with the end of his *dhoti* and ran away. The woman was still abusing and looking away. When she looked back at the fire-place, the vessel had disappeared. She began to bawl and howl with all her might.

Even now the people at the fair moved with caution taking particular care of their pockets. So all the members of our thieving fraternity hailing from Solapur, Barsi, Kavatha,

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[51]*Chool* : An improvised fire place, of cooking stones.

Salgara, Bhadgaon, Jawàli, Talegaon, Beed, came together and began to deliberate. Not a single professional thief of our fraternity in that fair could lay his hands on anything. All the pilgrims appeared to be well on their guard. 'What was to be done?' was the problem before the assembly.

Yallappa from Solapur said, 'All of us must find a way out.'

It was suggested that Santaram of Jawali was quite capable of hitting upon some sort of idea. Supan-bhauji said that he had hit upon an idea.

Our Dada was instantly sent to find out the time of departure of a train from Miraj to Latur. Dada returned with the news that a train was due to leave at four.

Sopan-bhauji said, 'Comrades, only half an hour remains for the departure of the train. All of you from our thieves' fraternity go to the bank of the Chandrabhaga and wait near the bathers in the river. Watch what I'm doing. Then run to the station with chappals, bundles, whatever you can lay your hands on and get into the train. We shall get down four-five stations later.

All the gangsters of our fraternity went to the bank of the Chandrabhaga. Santaram-bhauji along with fifteen to twenty of our people went on the Chandrabhaga bridge. Exactly at quarter-to-four Santaram and his companions began to howl and bawl till their cries reached a concerted crescendo: 'Run, Run, Deluge! Chandrabhaga in flood! Run! Save your lives! The flood's very near!' They kept on bawling and howling.

The people of our fraternity who were waiting by the crowd of bathers just pretended to run in fear, the bathers too began to run shouting: 'Flood! Flood! Our people on the bridge kept up the din. Those of us who were standing on the bank of the Chandrabhaga stared at the river and look up the shouting and howled 'Run! Run!' and frightened the crowd.

Some people were taking a bath, some others were dressing. All the pilgrims began to run to save their lives. People from our thieves' community, with false assurances of assistance, said to old men, rich persons : 'Come, we'll take you to a safe place, and lifted their bundles, chappals, shoulder bags and all sorts of things and ran towards the railway station.

Soon afterwards Santaram-bhauji, Sopan-bhauji of Jawali, Sakharam of Bhadgaon, Solapur's Yallappa and their companions stopped howling and arrived at the station. The train was then in the station. Our people got in quickly.

All Pandharpur was agog with the shouts: 'the Chandrabhaga is in flood.' That was how the people of our thieves' community demonstrated their skill to the pilgrims of Pandharpur. And Pandurang of Pandharpur came to the help of our thieving community.

All the people of our gang were pleased. Some got shoulder-bags and some others, bundles. In the stampede and running people's pockets were picked. Women from our community stole necklaces and lockets from women's necks. Our Manikdada picked two pockets, while Sambha-bhau, Anna brought bundles, shoulder-bags, footwear.

Many of our people travelled as far as Barsi. Our first halt was at Jawali. All of us got down there. All the stolen goods wre distributed. Then we arrived at Latur. In the shoulder-bags picked by Bhau and Anna, we found plenty of *rotis* and *bhakars*. We ate the *rotis* and *bhakars* with ground-nuts and chillies, drank water and satiated our hunger of several days.

One day after school I was carrying my father's *bhakar* by the village path. Two police constables were approaching me from the Latur side on bicycles. As soon as I saw them, I was so confused and frightened that I could not think.

There was a mound in the nearby field of a *musalman*, Karim uncle. By the side of the mound was a castor oil plant. I began to run to hide from the police. The mound was quite high. I tumbled down the mound and pissed in my shorts in panic. I even did not know when and where the *bhakar* I was carrying for father fell. The vegetable bowl had fallen in the path of the police. I lay flat and still in the ditch at the bottom of the mound to avoid being seen by the police. Unfortunately, the police saw the vegetable bowl and the *bhakar* lying in their path, and they stopped. They climbed up the mound, looked down at me, and asked me who I was.

I was lying still like a corpse. One of the constables grabbed

me and asked, 'Where are you from? Are you from Dhanegaon?

I said 'yes'.

What community do you belong to?

As soon as I said, that I belonged to the Pathruts, the constable slapped me on the face. Once again I pissed in my shorts. I invoked the names of all the gods and silently prayed, 'O God! please save me from the police, I have committed no sin. I only said I belonged to the Pathruts and they beat me.'

Once again the police asked me, 'Tell us where Narya, Mankya, Bhagwanya are. I replied that they were in the village. They asked me, 'Whose brother are you?' In panic I blurted out the truth that I was Manikdada's brother. Instantly the constable gave me a resounding slap on the face.

'You're the brother of a thief, come with us to the village.' So saying they took me to the village.

I thought of telling them that I was studying in a school so that they might not beat me. So I pleaded piteously, 'Saab, I go to school.'

The police retorted, 'You, a brat of thieving community! Has your father ever gone to school? Come, now let your schooling be in prison.'

Then I really despaired thinking that everything was over with me, they were going to put me in jail.

They took me to the village. 'Tell us where's Narya's house?' I took them to Narya's house.

The police asked Narya's father, Tulshiram, where Narya was. His father said that Narya was not in the village. The police pulled out a stick from the roof of the hut and began to wallop Tulshiram. His wife intervened. They began to beat her too. They asked, 'Tell us where is Narya. What has he stolen and brought here?'

Narya's father, Tulshiram, wailed, 'See for yourself, saab, there's nothing in the hut.'

The police entered the hut and searched around. They found nothing. The police asked Narya's father to attend the Panchayat.

Then the police shouted at me, 'Eh, you son of a Pathrut, take us to your hut, come, let us meet Mankya.' They took me to our hut. By then mother had burried the stolen saris and coverlets in a garbage ditch.

As soon as the police entered the hut, they pulled at mother's sari. They asked her, 'Tell us where is your son, Mankya. They began to wallop mother. I began to weep in a loud and shrill tone.

I thought my mother never stole, even then whenever the police came to our hut, they thrashed her, and all just stood around and watched.

Then the police asked my mother, 'You harlot, where did you get such a costly sari? Do you have the cash-memo for this sari?'

Mother wailed, 'It's been bought long back. I don't know where's the cash-memo.'

'Show the cash-memo or take off the sari and hand it over to us,' demanded the police.

Mother pleaded, 'Saab, I've no other sari.'

She fell at their feet and touched their feet repeatedly, praying, 'Saab, we've not stolen anything; my son goes to school, please let him go.' Dhondabai prostrated herself on their feet and the police kept on kicking her.

The police alleged, 'A large containing five hundred rupees was picked at Latur yesterday. It's been picked by your sons, we know it. Tell us where's that money. Either return the money or face arrest and imprisonment.'

The police warned, 'Look, we're waiting at the Patil's house in the village, you better bring five hundred rupees there.' Then they went away.

My father went to his employer and begged and borrowed a full year's wages. My mother borrowed some amount from a money-lender at the interest rate of rupees five for eight days.

The police came back, full-drunk, with a *ramoshi* and ordered him to take all of us to prison. They took a few brass utensils, and one *chaddar* in good condition. My father begged and entreated, 'Saab, my child has committed no theft. Please

do no charge-sheet us.' It was only when my father offered money that the police did not arrest me, my mother and father.

The police had often visited us in this fashion. They would descend upon us like a pack of wolves, beat us, search our huts, threaten us with arrest and imprisonment and depart after extorting money from us. This would embarrass and disgrace us in the eyes of the villagers. The news of a certain thief having been beaten up would spread like a wild fire. Even if some one desired to do honest work, nobody would employ him. The police would beat us making false allegations of thefts, even when, in fact, no theft had been committed. The police themselves were responsible for creating conditions in which we were left with no option but to steal. We would borrow money to give to the police. Dada, Anna, Bhau, were forced to resort to thieving to pay off the debts of moneylenders. And my mother and I were the innocent victims. I, simply because I was the youngest brother, and my mother, simply because she happened to be in the hut, suffered thrashings at the hands of the police, though we never had any hand in the thefts. Moreover, whenever I went to school, urchins would crowd round me shouting: 'Here comes a thief! Here comes a Pathrut!'

When I used to open the text-book for Marathi on the first page, I used to see: 'India is my country, All Indians are my brothers and sisters. I am proud of its rich and varied heritage.' I used to wonder why if all this were true, we were beaten with false allegations of theft, when in fact we had committed no theft; why they beat my mother, pulled at her sari and asked her to hand it over alleging it to be stolen property. Even now I often wonder why if Bharat is our country, we are discriminated against, why our race is branded and treated as a thieves' community. If all Indians are brothers and sisters, why are not my brothers given jobs? Why do we not get land, decent houses? If we are all brothers, why are my brothers forced to resort to thieving in order to feed our people at home?

If a domesticated animal, tied to a peg, is not given its usual

feed, its ration of grass, it growls, grumbles and cries out. Then at night, when it can stand the gnawing hunger no more, it pulls and tugs at the rope tied to the peg till the rope snaps. It then runs, falls on and devours whatever crop it can eat in whosoever's farm it may be standing in. When satiated fully, it returns to its place. The farmer, whose crop has been so eaten, and destroyed, tracks down the animal by its foot-marks and locks it in a pound. It is released only when due fine is paid.

In the same way whenever my brother is caught and imprisoned, his release is obtained by paying the lawyer and the court necessary fees, fines and the bail-amount, Hence I feel there is no difference between my brothers and cattle.

We are forced to take to thieving because we are denied work. Why is it then that the whole community is branded as thieves? Why are we denied opportunities to live a decent life? Why is my mother forced to borrow from moneylenders to pay the police? And when the burden of loans piles up, why are my all brothers forced to resort to thieving to pay off the debt? Are we to be proud of this varied heritage because we have been inured to these conditions for ages? I began to understand as I began to read. And when I read the Pledge on the first page of the text-book Marathi, I realised how false it was and felt sad. I blamed my fate and continued my schooling, growing up in this branded community praying God and enduring mutely and meekly my pains and agonies.

One day a man who had gone to Pandharpur on a thieving trip, saw Dada riding a bicycle in Barsi. That man told Anna that he had seen Manik in Barsi. Anna and my sister-in-law's brother, Yellappa, went to bring him back. They went round and searched all Barsi, but they could not find him. Late at night they saw him working in a hotel. Anna asked Dada, 'Why have you come to this place? Your children and wife are at home. Come home with us.' They took Dada out of the hotel. Dada took them to his dwelling. There was a women there. Dada told Anna and Yellappa, "I've kept this woman as my mistress. I'll come only if you are willing to take her along with me." So they returned with Dada and his mistress to Dhanegaon.

On their arrival at Dhanegaon we kept on staring at that woman. How did Manikdada manage to allure the woman? All the women in our home mused, "What made this woman go after Dada?" Dada had in no way shown any marked improvement. Neither had he earned substantial money. He had carried with him the shawl (which Harchanda had pilfered) when he had gone away in a huff. Now he had worn a shirt made of that shawl.

Everybody could clearly see what Dada's pecuniary condition was with that shirt on him. Everybody wondered how Dada managed to entice a city-woman. Anybody would drop in and remark, "What a shame! Mankya has kept a woman for a sinful purpose, when he already has children and a wife!" It was all over Dhangaon that Pathrut's Mankya had brought a woman from Barsi.

Every day all the women of the village passed our hut while going to the shityard for their daily shitting-sessions. As they passed to and fro, or sat to shit, they gossipped about this woman. As they talked loudly we could clearly hear it in our hut. Then Dada's mistress, Padmini, would feel very awkward and embarrassed. I did not like it. I used to think then that Dada had done a commendable thing that he brought a second sister-in-law. For the first sister-in-law often beat me. At times the shitting women's talk went and became very loud. So I used to go up the tin-roof to stop their gossiping. I would pretend to examine the gourds and say to myself quite loudly: 'Has the gourd ripened and plumped up? What, has the gourd-creeper withered?' The shitting women behind the wall would hear me, think that a man had climbed the roof and stop their blather. Then again I used to cut the withered gourds and throw them at the shitting women, so that the next time they came, they sat farther away from our hut. Then they would finish their defecation quickly and quietly, and walk away cursing and abusing.

As it was, our women were not used to keeping themselves clean. The new sister-in-law was very clean and wore a natty make-up. There was a huge difference between the way she spoke and the way we did. Sometimes to help in the

household chores she would respectfully ask my elder brother's wife, 'Oh Vahinibai, may I accompany you to fetch water?' All the sisters-in-law would snigger. They had never heard such language in their households. They used to jeer at and make fun of her. Some called her 'Padme', but most women addressed her as Nawadi[52] So that Nawadi became the commonly used sobriquet to call her by. I, however, always called her Bhabhi.

One day all the other sisters-in-law asked Nawadi, 'Why do you wear a petticoat underneath your sari? Are you a *dombari*[53]? We are required to work on digging ditches, so why do you wear a petticoat? Why do you wear chemise underneath your jumper?' They kept on pressing her with such questions. One day Nawadi went to the river for her bath and while bathing threw her bodice and petticoat in the river.

She had by now become well inured to our ways. She was also quite sharp and wise. One day she called Dada into Pandurangdada's hut and asked him, 'Manik, why did you tell lies? You told me you had a farm, an orchard, bulls and cattle and a well-to-do family. You also told me that you were unmarried. How could you tell such lies?' She was quite annoyed and kept on pressing him with such questions.

I was listening to their exchanges. Dada replied, 'Forget all that, Padmini. Am I not with you? I'll never leave you.'

And gradually she got used to the ways of our household. Everybody in our household called me Laxman or Lakshya. Nawadi, however, always addressed me as "Young *Raosab*"[54] with sincere affection. She loved me very much. Whenever she went to work, she dug ditches like any full-grown adult worker. In our household her work was appreciated with such exclamations: What an admirable Nawadi we have been blessed with in our work!

The eldest sister-in-law (Manik's wife) and Nawadi, often

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[52]*Nawadi* : A newly-arrived.

[53]*Dombari* : A low caste community. They live by showing acrobatic feats on streets.

[54]*Raosab* : Used to show respect for the addressee.

quarrelled violently. Manik's wife abused and cursed Nawadi. She would often exclaim, 'You harlot, you are like a bitter bit placed on a sweatmeat.' This went on for almost a year. Then Manik's first wife's brothers arrived at our place and said to Manik, 'Dada, we'll take away our sister. You keep the children and give us the marriage expenses incurred by us.'

A number of days passed in such quarrelling and haggling. Nobody had any regular work, the household was starving. Nawadi was starving as never before. Days on we lived on nothing but water. Finally, Dada said to Nawadi, 'You're seeing how we're passing our days in this house. Even you are starving to death. Let us arrange to send you somewhere, live happily wherever you may go!' With such pleadings Dada obtained her consent to part.

Kisan Patil and Dada visited a place in Karnataka and chose a suitable man. Then one day Kisan Patil and Dada took Nawadi with them. I alone wept bitterly. But then I also felt better at the thought that she would live happily, wherever she might go. Dada had said that the house he had chosen was a good household. So they took Nawadi away and returned without her.

On their return I learnt that they had sold Padmini to that man for two hundred fifty rupees. Kisan Patil took hundred rupees as his commission in the bargain and Dada brought home one hundred fifty rupees.

The household was passing through a period of acute starvation. With the money obtained Dada bought grain, salt, chillies, etc. Thus Dada brought Padmini and sold her. In the sorrow of the sale Dada drank everyday, and wept wailing, 'My Padmini, I sold you, darling?' Once again Dada settled down to a regular family-life. He began to go on thieving missions sometimes with the Salgara-gang.

Once Dada, Anna and Harchanda had gone on their usual thieving mission to the Ambejogai market. They could not pick any pocket that day. They saw that a certain man had lot of money and gold. Dada decided to practice deception on him. A gang of deceivers followed the man. As the man came out of the market, Dada took out of his pocket a bundle of

artificial gold, and gave it to Sayabu, one of his companions. Sayabu pretended to take out of his pocket a tobacco-pouch as he was passing by that man and dropped the bundle of imitation gold in front of him. The man, curious to know what was in it, loosened the knot of the bundle and opened it. He saw glittering yellow gold. As he was about to put it into his pocket, Dada came up to him and asked, 'That man dropped something. Show me what it is.'

At the same time Sayabu's companion came there and pretended to ask Dada, 'Did you find here something dropped by me?' Dada sent him away by telling him something in a garbled conversation that meant no. Then Dada beckoned that man aside took from him some money and two rings from his fingers for keeping quiet about the gold he had found. Dada was quite pleased with the bargain.

At that moment, however, a friend of that man, who had been cheated before, came there. He knew of this trick of cheating a man out of his genuine gold and money in exchange for false gold. He whispered something in the ear of the cheated man, and Dada began to run away. The people around caught him and beat him and handed him over to the police. The police also thrashed him. Frightened of further beating Dada confessed him offence. He was imprisoned for two months with a fine of Rs. One hundred and fifty. If Dada failed to pay the fine he had to undergo one more month's imprisonment. Dada had no money to pay the fine. So he had to live in the prison at Beed for three months. During this period of imprisonment the persons from his gang paid his share at our. house.

Anna, Harchanda had started going with the Bhadgaon gang for thieving. Harchanda used to pilfer tins of cooking oil from the Latur market. Usually we never had cooking oil for seasoning and frying. But now we had more than enough refined oil and coconut oil. While going to school, I used to put so much oil on my head that it streaked down my forehead.

Whenever Harchanda brought well-stitched bags, I kept them for my school books and the slate. I never bought a new

bag for my school out of our money.

I never had chappals or shoes for my feet. I roamed about bare-footed. I always pestered Harchanda to bring me a pair of shoes or chappals of the size of my feet. Once he did get a pair shoes rather small for my feet. Harchanda had opted for it in his share of the booty particularly for me. But the shoes were so small that they would not accept my feet. Having a pair of shoes was an opportunity of a life-time. I applied soap-lather all over my feet and managed to squeeze them into the shoes after half an hour's struggle. I wore the shoes and roamed about proudly in the village.

I showed the shoes to my friends in the class, 'Look, what a lovely pair of shoes! It's specially bought for me.' Many boys sneered : 'How can Lakshya afford such a costly pair of shoes! His brother must have stolen it ? I returned home crestfallen as if I were thrashed with a boot. The boots would not slip off my feet, however hard I struggled to remove them. Finally Harchanda managed to take them off. My feet had become red with inflamation, and were covered with big blisters. Anna sold the pair to a Maratha from Sonavati as it was too small for me.

I sadly felt that once in a life-time I had got a pair of shoes and I lost even that. When a scorching summer seared my feet, I would go round all the garbage heaps in search of torn and worn-out chappals and shoes. I used to wear a large sized chappal on one foot, and a shoe on the other and drag my feet while walking. If I got a shoe too large for my foot, I would stuff it with rags so that I could wear it. I never had a pair of decent chappals or shoes. Constant trudging about barefooted had made the soles of my feet hard and calloused. When Anna sold the pair of shoes, I wept bitterly.

Harchanda promised that he would bring chappals for me when he went on a thieving trip next time. Harchanda loved me dearly. Harchanda and I were the only unmarried persons in our house. Our sister-in-laws looked after us. They looked after Harchanda well for he had started earning in his thieving expeditions. They would get the stolen saris brought home by Harchanda. I being a non-earning member was always

snubbed and treated curtly. I was hardly ever given enough to eat.

On some occasions, when Dada, Anna, Babu, Bhau, Harchanda, Sambha, Bhima, Narya, returned from a thieving expedition, we would kill and cook a pig. On that day Dada would go to Latur and buy a few bottles of illicit liquor. These bottles contained varnish used in polishing wood. Dada, Narya, Baba and Bhau would prepare liquor out of the varnish. They would take two utensils and pour water in them; then add the varnish from the bottles to this water, stir the contents well and filter the liquid by using a piece of cloth. Then they would filter it through a wad of cotton. The brew was tested to see if it was sufficiently strong. A little liquid was taken on a finger-tip and a burning match-stick, brought near it. If the liquid burnt with a blue flame, it was a pretty strong concoction.

Then they would ask me to fetch pig's meat, and start drinking the liquor.

If ever I was troubled by cough, Baba and Dada would offer me a glass of that brew. I would refuse it as its strong smell irritated my nostrils. They would say 'Come Bapu, take it. It's good for your cough.'

They would put the glass in my hand. It was customary to bow in obeisance before all the elders before drinking. I had to bow in obeisance before Anna, Dada and Baba and then drink my glass. All of them would be sitting in a close circle. I being the youngest of them all, had to touch in respect the feet of all sitting around. As I bent to touch the feet, all would lovingly caress my back and bless me. After I had touched the feet of all, I would put the glass to my lips and drink in one long draught. Everyone would appreciatively commend my drinking: 'Bravo! Bravo!'

Good people outside our community would say drinking was not good. But our house had its own ways. Everybody in our house drank liquor together. When I showed a reluctance to take drinks, Dada said, 'Drink, it's a good antidote against fever, cold.' They forced me to drink. When I was in the fourth standard, my Guruji and many other people advised

me not to drink. So I gave up drinking since I began to study in the fourth standard.

In such conditions I somehow managed to pass the Board Examination for the fourth standard.

My father and Dada were very much pleased. 'Lakshman has done well, passed four books. He'll have to go to other town to study the fifth book.' 'Such were the comments passed in happiness.

Sometimes, while on his thieving trips, Dada would go to Solapur. Many of our relatives lived there. So Dada knew that there was a school run for our community. The school provided free meals. Dada suggested, 'Laxman should be admitted to the school in Solapur.' How could I live so far away all alone? So they thought that Laxman should be sent along with the boys of Jawali.

So Dada went to Jawali to find out if Shiva, Babushah—boys from Jawali — would be willing to go. He asked his brother-in-law, Santaram. Santaram had married a woman from Solapur. So his brother-in-law, who was also Shiva's maternal uncle, was there. Thus it was decided that we would go to Solapur.

Sidram Dada of Solapur was informed that we would go to the school in Solapur. Sidramdada lived in Salgar locality and was a wrestler of sorts. He was feared in that locality.

At last we went to Solapur with our School Leaving Certificates. We went to Sidram Dada's house. That was the first time I had visited Solapur. So I thought that the sun rose in the west instead of the east. I could not understand why the sun rose from the wrong side.

Sidram-Dada took us to Shamrao Guruji's house at Wadi very early in the morning. Shamrao Guruji was the first leader of our community. His Ashram Shala[55] was at Songaon. We met Shamrao Guruji. We sat in his office.

There were silver shields hung on the walls of the office. I thought shields were used in battles. How did they appear in this house? I mused, for so far I had seen a shield only in a picture in a book. Seeing the silver shields I imagined the

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[55] *Ashram Shala* : Residential School.

battles between kings, and thought of their huge forts. And I thought that Shamrao's father must have taken part in some battles, and that the shields must be from those battles.

After we came out of Shamrao's house, Sidram-Dada told me, 'Look, how many shields Guruji has in his house. All these are presents to his Ashram Shala. The Government has given him a grant. He is running a fine school.'

So far we had only heard Shamrao's name. That was the first time we had seen Shamrao in person.

After our talk with him, we were invited to go to Songaon. I, Sidram-Dada, Shirva and Babushah came to the bus-stand to go to Songaon. The bus for Songaon was already there at the bus-stand. We got into the bus. Shamrao Guruji was already seated in the same bus. We got down at Songaon. Shamrao Guruji's son was the Headmaster of the school. We kept our luggage in one room and gave our certificates to the Headmaster. We were admitted to the fifth standard.

We were overjoyed that day. Now even if our parents did not teach us, we would be provided with free meals, lodging and books. The very thought gladdened our hearts. Then Sidram-Dada left us there and went to Solapur.

The Songaon Residential School was in a secluded place, there was no town nearby. A furlong or two away from the school was a river. We thought the atmosphere of the school was rather cheerless.

A well was being dug nearby. We went to the river to take our bath that day. We returned bathed. The bell rang for the night meals. Students crowded to take plates and bowls. I too took a plate, a bowl and a glass. Shiva, Babushah and I sat close to one another in on line.

The senior boys were no longer timid; they boldly shouted: 'Bring *rotis* here, Give us vegetable curry.' The peons served the meals. They gave every student two *rotis* of *milo* and then served *dal*. We too were served with two *rotis* and *dal* along with the others. *Rotis* were placed on a large piece of cloth and *dal* was in a big vessel. As the food was being served, a sudden gust of wind blew away the *rotis*. Some students caught them and hid them in their pockets. The *rotis* were so

thin that they could not be eaten in three four bites. Since we were newcomers, we were given half a *roti* extra. We devoured the *rotis* down in no time.

We did not know how many *rotis* were given to each student. We thought we would be given a full, satisfying meals. We asked for some more *rotis*. The Guruji told us, 'Only two rotis each are given at each meal. Since you are new comers, you were given two and a half. Eat what's given and go.' We got up and went away.

Babushah and Shiva grumbled: 'What's to be done, baba? We get only *milo-bhakars* here; moreover, we don't get a full, satisfying meal.'

They became sad. I, however, did not feel anything amiss, for in my village I was not certain of getting even this much.

'Let it be, we are at least certain of getting daily meals. That is enough for me,' I thought to myself and joined the other boys. We got acquainted with some of them.

We used to go to the river for our daily bath. Every Sunday we received a cake of soap. We washed our shirts and shorts. We spent almost a fortnight in this way.

Siva and Babushah were well-off at their homes, they had never starved. So one day they began to weep, and pleaded with Guruji that they did not want to stay there and wanted to go home. We met at prayers in the morning. After the prayers the Headmaster asked: 'Who among you do not want to stay here? Those who want to return to their villages should step out of the files. They'll be sent away.'

Shiva and Babushah stepped out together, and began weeping, saying that they desired to go away. The Headmaster caned them both. They were thrashed in front of all the boys. They began to weep and said, 'We'll not go away, Guruji.'

We attended the school that day. After school Babushah, Shiva and I went to a distant spot. At first we began to weep, then we fell to thinking.

What was the way out of this dilemma? We were far away in an alien place.

Babushah was the eldest. He suggested that we should run away at night. Shiva was willing to go with him. While I was

sleeping, Babushah and Shiva ran away. I did not know when; it was all over the school that the boys from Jawali had run away.

I, now left alone, was restless. I too wanted to run away with them. I did not say anything as I was afraid that Guruji would thrash me.

The police asked Babushah and Shiva near Solapur where they were going at night, and took them to the police station. Babushah gave Sidram-Dada's address. The Police sent for Sidram-Dada who was living in the Salgar locality. Sidram-Dada secured their release and came to me. I too prepared myself to go with Sidram-Dada.

The Headmaster said that only if we gave the expenses incurred on the students, would he issue the school leaving certificates. Sidram-Dada somehow managed to take me to Solapur. I was very happy to see Shiva and Babushah there.

In fact Sidram-Dada himself was quite poor. I took money from him on his pay-day and went back to Dhanegaon.

The boys at the school said, 'Lakshya, you've lost this year. Now they won't admit you so late to the school. Why did you not come earlier?' I did not know anything of these rules. I went to Bebhalgaon and after much entreaties and pleadings with the Headmaster got myself admitted to the Fifth standard. I was very happy to begin my studies.

There I struck friendship with a fisherman's son, Dagadya. Dagadya's mother was a Muslim and father, a fisherman. His father, Santaram, looked after the horses of Dagdusaheb Deshmukh at Babhalgaon and he also hunted deer. Thus hunting brought me and Dagadya closer. After school hours we used to take a fishing net and go to the river to fish. Sometimes we hunted pigeons, ducks and such other birds with a catapult.

One day the police caught Harchanda while stealing. They grilled him and beat him severely to know the names of his companions. But he did not tell the names. So the ploice admitted him to a Remand Home.

Now the members of our family grumbled: 'Harchanda was bringing good income. It is impossible to try picking

pockets and stealing in Latur now. For everybody, including the police, has come to know that we are thieves.'

The household was being maintained somehow on the earnings of Harchanda. Now that also stopped.

My schooling continued all through this. I was indifferent to arrests, beatings, thefts and continued to attend school regularly. On occasions I had to go to school without eating *bhakar;* and felt hunger gnawing in my belly; on such occasions Dagadya and I skipped school during the short recess and escaped through the window. We searched for beehives in the woods, looked on trees for the nests of pigeons. If we came across an egg, we would smear it with cowdung, boil it and eat it. We always kept a catapult and a match-box in our school bags. We killed pigeons and *khaduls* with the catapult, roasted them and ate them without *bhakar.* Next day Guruji would beat us for skipping school. We would suffer it meekly.

The boys at the school always mocked and jeered at me. They would slap me and run away without any rhyme or reason. I sometimes abused them. Then they would beat me all the more.

Even girls Dhanegaon came to Babhul for studies. They too would be similarly harassed. There was Sulbha, a brahmin girl, Shakuntala, a Patil and also a girl of a Bembade. The school-boys harassed them in many ways. The boys made a feint of attacking them. Whenever the girls saw the boys approaching, they left the main road and took to the extreme side of it, keeping a good distance between themselves and the boys. I too was reduced to behaving like them, and as the boys came after me, I would keep to the side of the road leaving a wide gap between us. If ever I failed to leave the road free for them, some of the vagabond urchins from our village would tease me.

So I always kept company with the girls of my village. Sulbha's brother, Arun Joshi, was my friend, so I always went with him. I never mixed with other boys. Yet if a boy from my class saw me, he would sneer at me say, 'Lakshya, look at your knees, look how they are scratched and bruised.'

I would say to myself: 'Let it be. We are poor. We must suffer meekly whatever is said to us.'

So I would never reply back. As I always moved with Arun, the girls often entered into conversation with me. I felt very happy to talk to them. It pleased me that though I was just a Pathrut boy, girls who hailed from good, respectable families, talked to me.

I always accompanied them to and from the school. There would be plenty of berries hanging on the trees on the way. I would pick them. I would keep green, unripe ones for me and give Sulbha, Shakuntala ripe, brown ones. I always felt shy in the company of the girls. And when they spoke to me, I felt all the more shy and stammered.

Once Dada had received a shirt as his share of the theft. It was a full sleeved shirt. The shirt I used to wear was worn and torn. So I put on the stolen shirt. I was quite pleased to wear a new shirt. The sleeves were short and the shirt was so short that it revealed my body all round the middle.

One day I was going to school wearing this shirt, and Arun asked me, 'Laxman, why is the shirt so stitched?'

I bluffed, 'Dada brought it from Latur without taking my measurements.'

The girls laughed. Sulbha said, 'Laxman, please don't feel sorry. We just couldn't help laughing to see you in this shirt, you look so different from what you do in your usual clothes.'

I thought that the shirt looked untidy, so I cut its sleeves with a blade and stitched its sides with a needle. It looked much better than the old, patched-up shirt. I never felt ashamed of wearing stolen clothes, though they were often either too loose or too short.

I was never taught how one should move about, conduct oneself in the company of others.

Every Sunday was a holiday. That day I either went to the river for fishing or sat in the sun and killed the lice an my coverlet. I had only one pair of shorts and shirts. They too were infested with lice. I used to crush the lice keeping count

of the number I killed. When I had nothing to do, I would remove my shirt, keep a stone by my side and crush the lice pressing them on the stone with the nail of my finger. Sometimes I would surreptiously throw them under the bench of my school, if I caught them during a lesson. The *kargota* tied to my waist was full of lice and their nits. They had made their homes in that *kargota*. Any time I searched the *kargota* I would find lice in it. Constantly looking for them made my neck ache and I had to stop the search. Many a time my body itched all over on account of the lice and I scratched so much that blood came out through the scratches. Sometime I felt very restless; driven to madness I went to the river and rolled myself in the scorching sand of the mid-day sun to burn the lice to death. Then the lice would run all over the body. No boy in the school was willing to allow me to sit by his side.

At harvest-time all men and women from my household would go to a place with good crop to earn some money by working on farms. That was their yearly routine. At such a time I would be in deep trouble. I would be all alone in the house. My people would not leave behind anything for my daily meals.

During those days, whenever I was terribly hungry, I would dig out and eat the roots of the *tekali*[56] plant that grew by the Babhalgaon road. The roots tasted like coconut-kernel.

In those days I was fortunate in getting a good friend — Ankush Mekle, a fisherman's boy. If I went to the school without food, if I carried no *bhakar* with me, he would go round and say, 'Pathrut's Lakshya is starving, has no food, let us give him a bite each. All of them would collect some *bhakar* and give me.

All the boys usually sat in one class to take their afternoon meals. I sat in one corner of the class with a book in my hand, pretending to be engrossed in studies. But the fire of hunger would burn in my stomach. How could I concentrate on a book? Even then I sat there deliberately. The boys would

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[56]*Tekali* : A wild plant.

know that I sat there for I had brought no *bhakar* with me.

So no boy would have his meals where I sat. They would say, 'Lakshya is looking. His hungry look at our *bhakar* will cause pain in our stomachs.'

Ankush would collect *bhakari* and bring it to me. The sight of that *bhakari* would send thrills of joy through me, but at the same time there used to be pangs of sorrow for my poor, miserable condition. This went on for a pretty long time. The boys could not be expected to provide for me indefinitely. They soon showed no more sympathy and refused to give me *bhakari*.

When the ears of *jowar*[57] would be full and ready for harvesting Ankush and I would walk past the Rokdoba Temple after school-hours. Ankush would stand on the road and keep a watch and he would tell me to pick some *jowar*-ears from the field of Lingaram Chamle. I would then pick up some five-seven ears and put them in my school-bag. We would thresh them at Ankush's house and garner the grains.

Ankush's mother was a very kind and gentle woman. She would say: 'The poor child is away from his home' and would shower her affection on me. She would fry the grains for me as moist *jowar* was not accepted in a flour-mill for grinding. I would then get the grains ground from the flour-mill and she would prepare *bhakar* for me.

On occasions when I went to the school hungry and starving, and could not bear the gnawing hunger, I would steal the *bhakari* of my class-mates and go into the woods to eat them. Sometimes the boys would offer me the leftovers from their meals.

While I was schooling, I worked at Gynaba Kuthwade's house for a year and took my meals there. For some time I was on friendly terms with Gyanaba Kuthawade. His father ran a grocery shop. That was the only big grocery shop in our village. Gyanaba looked after me with affection. He used to steal copra and biscuits from the shop and bring them to me. Gyanaba's mother also loved me dearly. I helped her in preparing grain for grinding, washing utensils, getting grain

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[57] *Jowar* : Millet.

ground from flour mill. I used to sleep at their house. I got varieties of good and tasty things to eat at Kuthawade's house. I was quite happy while I lived with them.

Gyanaba's elder brothers, Tulshiram and Tukaram were womanisers and often visited prostitutes. I, Gyanaba and Tukaram were sleeping on the terrace one night. While Gyanaba and I were asleep, Tukaram surreptiously climbed on to the roof of Patil's house, went inside the house and slept with his daughter. Some of the people sleeping in Patil's house were awakened, while Tukaram tried to scurry back to his own house in haste. They pursued him. Tukaram ran onto the terrace and slept by our side covering himself with a counterpane. Patil's people broke open the door and came with sticks. They dragged Tukaram from the terrace into the living room and beat him severely with sticks. He received blows on his head and blood began to flow through the wounds. I trembled and shivered as if I had high fever. That was the first time I had witnessed such a scene, so I was very much frightened. Patil's people declared that they would kill him. So he was taken to Sonvati at night. Since then I left Gyanaba's house and stayed at my own house. I continued to go to the school from there.

I began to pick up the crumbs of knowledge as I began to read books. And I began to think a lot. I felt a beggar's lot was far better than mine. Why did God put me to this desolate grind? What sins had I committed in my previous birth? I skipped school every Tuesday and Friday, and waited for hours at the Temple of the Goddess with the hope that somebody might bring offering of food; I felt happy when some offerings arrived at the temple. In the rainy season (in Ashadha) I used to go into the portico of the temple and pray 'Oh Mother-Goddess, let the offerings of high and mighty people come to your feet and let me be blessed with food. I will burn frankincense before you.'

About five miles away from my village is situated the temple of the Goddess of Devtala. There used to be a fair every month or fortnight. People thronged there in large numbers. One Shevanta of our fraternity was the priestess of

that Mother-Goddess. So she, together with other four-five women, went round asking '*Jogva*[58].

I too pleaded with Shevanta and took a basket from the house, wore the ritualistic necklace of basil beads and asked for *Jogva* in every village on the way. Some offered *bhakar*; some, chapatiṣ or *dhapatya*[59]. As soon as chapatis or *dhapatya* were put in my basket, I used to eat them while still making the rounds for the *jogva*.

Once as usual I was proceeding to the Goddess of Devtala, and on my way I was visiting places and begging for *jogva*. I received some alms. I sat under a tree and began to put the pieces of chapatis and *dhapatya* in my pocket. I also ate a few pieces. For I knew that Shevanta on her own would not give me good pieces. Unfortunately Shevanta arrived there at that juncture. She too was moving about collecting *jogva*. She saw me munching the pieces and chided me angrily: 'Dirty wretch, a whore-pimp, I brought you with me because you were starving, and you've started swallowing all the good chapatis and *dhapatya*. I want neither your share nor you with me any more. We'll not take you with us from tomorrow! Since then she did not allow me to accompany her when she proceeded on her *jogva* rounds.

Guruji taught us in the school how Gautam Buddha, Mahavir Vardhaman acquired knowedge. What did the Buddha feel when he found a corpse in his path? How did he get enlightened under a peepul tree? Such questions benumbed my brain.

Fed up with my miserable poverty I had written a long letter to Indira Gandhi when she was the Prime Minister. I wrote in that letter; 'Mahatma Gandhi did not wear clothes so that the poor would be benefited, they would get clothes. When is Gandhiji's dream going to be fulfilled? Please take steps to see that the poor get one square meal a day at least.'

I had written this and many other such things. I even did not know, then, what an address was, how it was written. I addressed the letter : Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, Delhi

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[58]*Jogva* : Offerings asked from people in the name of God.
[59]*Dhapatya* : A kind of roti.

Raj. That was all the address.

I did not write my address anywhere in the letter. I was always afraid of the police. I thought that the police would beat me for writing such a letter to the Prime Minister.

I ended the letter with the plea : 'Respected Mataji, I've written this letter to you. If I've done anything wrong, please forgive me. If you think that this is a good letter, please declare publicly that it is a well-written letter, and that the boy who has written it should declare his name, so that he would receive a reward for the same. If you say so, I'll notify my address.' But nothing came of it. Whenever I remember it, I feel how ignorant, immature I was.

When I went to the school in Babhalgaon, I had no footwear. The feet burned when I walked in the scorching sun. Sometimes the burning heat made me feel as if my feet were on fire. I could never afford *chappals.*

Then an idea struck me. I thought of the covers of the previous year's note-books which were lying in the hut, and that *chappals* could be made of those covers. I cut the covers according to the measurements of my feet, obtained a long needle and stitched the covers placing them one over the other. Bhau had brought home a rubber-strip he had found in Latur. I made loops for the big toe to fit in out of that rubber strip and fitted them to the cover.

Next day I wore the chappals while going to school. I kept them on where the hot dusty road would have scorched my feet and carried them in my hands while walking on dry, hard land, lest they were torn by the hard road. My class-mates exclaimed: 'Lakshya, what a first-rate pair of *chappals* you have!' I simply kept quiet.

While I was studying in the Babhalgaon School, I always felt that I must achieve some reputation with an outstanding act. At least for a day people should say in admiration: 'This Pathrut's boy is remarkable.' On 15th August and 26th January the school always arranged speeches by students studying for matriculation. My speeches were the most outstanding. I used to win prizes for my excellent speeches. I became quite popular among the school students. Any time

there was a need for a student-speaker, it was said that laxman Gaikwad be invited to deliver the speech. I felt very proud and puffed up.

While I was studying in the ninth standard a debate was held on 'Should Women be Permitted to Take Education?' The teacher invited me from my class. I prepared my speech, making out a case that 'women should be permitted to study in schools. Women's education is essential and proper.' When I went to the class, I saw that all the girl-students from my class had gathered to hear me speak.

There were, however, some boys in the class, who thought themselves very wise and were dead against girls' education. They threatened me: 'Look Lakshya, you must speak as we tell you to speak, otherwise we'll thrash you outside. You must say that women's education is an improper thing.'

I was terribly afraid of them. Frightened that anyone of them might beat me, I agreed to speak as they desired me to speak. That day against my own wishes and opinions I argued against women's education.

The girls had thought that I would speak on their behalf holding up the view that women's education was a commendable, proper thing. They took me to be simple, gentle boy. In fact, what happened was contrary to their expectations.

Even today I cannot forgive myself for delivering that lecture and insulting them. Whenever I am reminded of it, I feel very sorry. I feel it was a great error I had committed in my life.

I was almost haunted by the thought that I was born a Pathrut's boy. *Bhajans*[60] were sung everyday only at Bembade's house in our village. I yearned to learn to sing those devotional songs. I used to go to the temple everyday and sit in a corner taking care not to touch anybody. Mahadeo Bembade, an old man, seeing me there regularly, came to have a soft corner for me.

He felt that if a Pathrut-boy came to listen to the group of devotional singers every day he too earned God's grace by his

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[60] *Bhajans* : Devotional songs.

good deed. He began to teach me how to sing *abhangas* [61]. I used to write down the text of the song and learn the words of the song by heart as I would cram the words of English in my lesson. Thus I learnt several *abhangas* by heart.

When a concert of devotional songs began at night, I would plead with and entreat other singers to let me sing at least one song. They would permit me to sing. I did not know anything about the rhythm, beat and tune of the song. I used to sing as I would recite a poem in the class. All those who had gathered there would laugh. Someone else would take up my *abhanga*, lest it remained only half-sung. Gradually, I began to sense the beat and I could strike cymbals to the correct beat. I slowly began to sing *abhanga* by repeatedly imitating other singers.

As days passed I began to go to respectable persons' houses with the group of devotional singers. All of them now began to touch me and I was no more an untouchable outcaste. I was simply overwhelmed with that feeling of camarderie.

I mused over the situation. I was just a Pathrut's boy. Nobody ever allowed me to fill water from wells, to touch anything. On one occasion I had made a fire and I was sitting before it warming myself in front of the temple of the Goddess in winter. Isvya came there and sat before the fire to warm himself. My hand accidentally brushed his body. He had a brass bowl in his hand. Instantly he said, 'Lakshya, you've polluted my bowl,' and he cursed and abused me. He put the bowl in the fire which was made by me. Then he pulled it out as if it was now purged of my pollution and went home. I used to be sad and crestfallen on such occasions.

Such an of-snubbed person like me was now being reveived into their company by people. I used to remain present at week-long religious functions, at *Kirtans*. The sound of cymbals and percussions would excite me and I would lose control over myself and run involuntarily towards those sounds. I too began to listen to sermons and preachings about sins and righteous deeds in *kirtans* and to readings of religious scriptures.

This brought subtle changes in my mind. I began to say

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[61] *Abhangs* : Devotional songs.

that eating crabs, fish, pigs every day was a sin. I began to observe Fridays and Saturdays in Shravan month as fasting days. There was one reason behind all these activities. Of all the people in our community I alone was received in houses, touched, spoken to gently and well-treated. Nobody was ever treated with dignity. I felt proud that I was being treated with dignity.

Then I too like the proverbial brahmin, who given permission to occupy the front porch, occupies the whole house gradually, began to spread the tentacles of my activities.

There were readings of the Ramayana in the Hanuman temple. I decided to read the Ramayana. Govind Patil, who had sponsored the readings was a Maratha. Marathas are very strict in their religious observances. If an untouchable touches a Maratha, that Maratha has to take a bath and drink cow's urine. How would Govind Patil, who did not allow even a Maratha to touch him, allow me to read sacred books? Such were my thoughts. Even then I was determined that one day I would read the sacred book on the platform of the Hanuman temple.

I asked Mahadeo Anna Bembade, 'Anna, I want to read the sacred book.' Anna said, 'Laxman, go to Govind Patil and say to him, All are children of God, then why do you not allow me to read the Sacred book?' See what he has to say.

I did not dare approach Govind Patil. I sat in the temple and listened to the readings of the sacred book.

One day I mustered courage and dared ask him to allow me to read the sacred book in the temple. Govind Patil was furious. He chided me 'You belong to the community of pig-and-cat-eaters, and you want to read the sacred book!' I showed him the string of basil-beads worn by me. I always wore it since I started singing *bhajans*. I said to him, 'Since I have started singing *bhajans* I've left off eating all these things. I observe religious fasts. Look at this string of basil-beads round my neck.'

Govind Patil then told me, 'All right. Take a bath every day before coming here and first learn how to read.'

So I learnt to read *Shivaleelmrit* and the condensed edition

of the *Bhagvadgita*. I began to read the *Pothi*[62] in the temple as well as the others who read there. All the girls and women of the village used to say in admiration, 'Look, what a sweet voice Pathrut's Lakshya has!' Nobody ever called me Laxman.

My sisters-in-law were quite fed up with me. They would often grumble: of what use was reading sacred books, singing *bhajans* or going to school. They complained that instead of going on useful thieving expeditions I went to 'useless school,' and sarcastically remarked : 'Who would ever make you a teacher!' They did not want to feed me, such an idler. My sister-in-law used to grind corn every-day. While grinding *jowar* grains some little flour would remain stuck to the flanges of the grindstone. She would scrape it and prepare a *bhakar* and give it to me tied in a piece of cloth while going to the school. Sometimes I would be told to eat coarsely-ground *jowar* at home and also take it to school. If I dared complain to any of my brothers, they would beat me, and stop giving me food altogether. All my sisters-in-law looked after their husbands well, but Harchanda and I were utterly neglected. If Harchanda brought home saris or oil tins from his thieving trips, they would treat him well for a change.

We never saw comfortable days in our household. It was always poverty and a wretched, grovelling life. Only on major festival days did we prepare *chapatis* out of hardly a quarter kilo wheat. That too under the haunting fear of the evil black magic of a sorceress. We suspected that our neighbour, my cousin's wife—Anjali—indulged in sorcery. So we always kept marking-huts and cowrie shells at hand, while boiling *puran.*[63]

My sister-in-law resolved to teach Anjali a lesson one festival day. She believed that Anjalibai took away our puran and left her *bhakar* with us by using witchcraft. So my sister-in-law started a fire in the mud-stove and put a utensil filled with water on it, as if she were boiling gram *dal* in it. Then instead of *chana dal* she put cowdung in the utensil and said to us: 'Now look, when she starts indulging in black·magic, all the cowding from our utensil will fly away and appear in her

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[62]*Pothi* : The sacred book of religion.
[63]*Puran* : A boiled and sweetened paste of gram.

utensil. On every festival day she has taken away our *puran* by her black magic. When we start making *bhakars*, she pilfers them by making them fly to her by her sorcery. So we never see good days.'

We waited, watching eagerly, on that day, but nothing happened. Then the sister-in-law explained: 'The harlot has found out our trick and it has boomeranged on us. I'll take care of her on the next festival day.'

I never understood sorcery or witchcraft. My sister-in-law had told me that if one wanted to learn the craft and tricks of sorcery, one had to eat human excreta of the size of the tamarind-seed on five Saturdays. Only then did one acquire the power of sorcery.

Whenever I felt hungry, I thought of asking Anjalibai to initiate me into the craft of sorcery and of eating human excreta on five Saturdays, so that I would never have to starve. Should people from good families practice sorcery? If I did not acquire the craft even after eating human excreta, what then? These questions deterred me from asking Anjalibai anything.

Once my father had told me that if one sat continuously for a month between a *rui*[64] and a berry tree to relieve oneself, and then buried a rupee between these trees located in a cemetery, one would always be left with a rupee in his purse, whatever amount one might spend. Moreover such a person understood the language of birds.

So I searched for a place where a felt plant and a berry tree grew near each other. And I relieved myself between them every day for a month without fail. I also parted with a rupee leaving nothing in my pocket. All in vain. This failure had put suspicion in my heart about the sorcery project. I feared that it would be worse than useless if I ate human excreta for five Saturdays without acquiring the craft of sorcery in the bargain. So I gave up the idea of learning sorcery.

The thought of the dire situations poverty had forced me to face and the thought of all the bizarre things I thought of doing to relieve myself of poverty still sear my mind just as

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[64]*Rui* : Felt plant.

branding by hot iron would sear the body.

One day one of the sisters-in-law and I were sleeping in the yard just in front of our hut. The other sisters-in-law were sleeping in the hut. At dead of night somebody came and brazenly lay on my sister-in-law. He pressed a hand on her mouth and lay by her side. I was wide awake but pretended to be fast asleep, and lay quiet. The stranger with a rough mauling action pressed down my sister-in-law, had intercourse with her and ran away. Then my sister-in-law began to bawl and shout loudly : 'Run! Run! some bastard lay on my body and ran away.' On hearing her shout all of us ran after him, but by then he had disappeared in the dark. Then the other sisters-in-law asked her if he had done anything to her. The sister-in-law replied that she did not allow him to sleep with her. 'The bastard was trying to lie on me and had put his palm on my mouth,' she said. She knew full well what exactly the truth was. She has prevaricated because she was afraid that Bhau, her husband, would divorce her.

Once Bhau was down with fever. He had wasted away so much that his arms and legs appeared thin bars. All were worried that he would not recover. So Anna managed to collect some money with great difficulty. He begged of everybody in the village to lend him a bullock-cart to take Bhau to Latur for treatment. Nobody was willing to lend one.

Digu Bembade's bullock-cart was to make a trip to Latur at the same time. Anna begged Bembade to let Bhau sit in the bullock-cart as he had to be taken to a hospital. Nagu Bembade retorted arrogantly: 'Is it your father's bullock-cart? We can't take him.' Anna said, 'We beg of you. We touch your feet. Please save our brother. Take him with you in the cart, we'll walk along with the cart.' But Bembade refused to take Bhau in the cart.

At last Bhau was carried to the hospital on our cousin Tulshiram's donkey and somehow Bhau's wife was saved from widowhood. Nobody from the village ever showed any willingness to help us.

Ligra Chamle, who was quite rich, offered decayed and vermin-infested *jowar* grain as though he were performing a

great act of philanthropy, when people starved almost to death in Akhad Shravan. He would offer three-four kilos of decayed grain and force us to supply in exchange compost manure at a ridiculously cheap rate and exploit the poor as easily as he would twist a cock's neck to kill it. Our villagers were so cruelly indifferent that nobody paid any attention if a poor man was being beaten and whipped mercilessly.

The saying that 'even an earthen jar will not be loaned, on the pledge of a metal bowl' was absolutely true in respect of the people of our village. At last Bhau recovered and returned.

Once again a quarrel erupted among the sisters-in-law. They wanted to live separately. At last partition was decided upon. The property was divided and allotments made. Three of us—Father, Harchanda and I—were left out. Baba, my father, was engaged in maize-guarding work. Harchanda regularly pursued his thieving business. Everybody had affection for Harchanda. As such everybody was prepared to take Harchanda in his household. Anna offered to look after Baba.

Nobody was willing to shoulder the responsibility of looking after me. They said, 'We have to look after our wives and children. How can we ever manage to spend on his books and notebooks?' At last Sambhabhau agreed to take me into his household. It was agreed that all the brothers should share the annual expenditure on my books.

Our eldest brother took Harchanda into his household, for he always brought in something from his thieving trips. Anna took Baba into his. All began to live separately and maintain their families. Anna went to his father-in-law's house as he found it very difficult to maintain his family at Dhanegaon. Dada, the eldest brother, also went to his in-laws and joined their gang. Now only Bhau, his wife and I lived in Dhanegaon. After sometime Bhau sent his wife away for the harvest period. So I used to prepare *rotis* for him. Bhau used to earn three-four rupees every day. Our hut was some distance away from the village, almost in the village shit-yard.

Sometimes Bhau used to come back very late. I used to wait for him at the door of the temple of the Goddess. As the night

advanced, I sat there for hours and finally filled with fear I would fall asleep. When Bhau would return he would wake me up and we would go home. If there was nothing at home, I starved till Bhau returned. Bhau would bring back a couple of kilos of *jower* flour. He would then make a fire in the earthern stove and prepare food for me.

One day I had gone to the school at Babhalgaon and Bhau had gone to his work. Nobody was in the house. I had locked the house before going to the school. On my return I saw that the lock was broken and lying on the ground. The hasp was removed and the door was open.

I was afraid of remaining in the house. I stood on the road weeping. I told one of my school friends that my door had been broken open. I told him to come along with me and we entered the house very cautiously. Everything was lying scattered and open. There was a terylene shirt which Harchanda had stolen in one of his trips. I took great care of that shirt. That was the only costly shirt I had ever got in my life. That was gone. I used to wear it on festive occasions. I felt that I was robbed of a great treasure and burst into tears.

My friend tried to console me and quiet me down. Even the *bhakar* I had kept in a basket had been stolen. Bhau's dhoti, coverlet; in fact, all the household items had been stolen. I was terribly hungry. Balacharya Guruji's son, Arun, was standing by. He went home and told his sister that there had been a burglary at Laxman's house, even his *bhakar* had been stolen, and that he was very hungry. So Sulbha called me and gave me *bhakar* and vegetable curry. I ate that and sat wondering who might have stolen the things.

Bhau came at night. Those were winter days and there was nothing in the house to cover ourselves with. Bhau did not have money. He had only the dhoti that he wore and I often tried to warm myself by covering myself with one end of it. If it was unbearably cold we made a fire and sat by it to warm ourselves. I used to take the books out of my school-bag and wear the bag like a cap over my head. I and Bhau often sat weeping blaming our fate and God. We came to know two days later that my cousin's son, Narya had burgled our house.

We were told that he had sold the shirt, the dhoti and the coverlet for ten rupees at Sonvati. We had no money to buy them back. Narya too had run away. Thus we suffered miserably.

Bhau used the only *dhoti* he had as a coverlet at night and wore it in the morning. Bhau told me at about this time that he had started learning to repair machines and that his boss was going to give him an increment in his wages. He had also promised to give him a permanent job as a mechanic. So I felt that Bhau would now live in Latur, wear long pants and live like a rich sahib. I would also go to Latur with him and I would also have a good time. I would see buses, cars, trains, pictures. People would look at us and say in wonder: 'Look, how these Pathrut people have become rich and modern after going to Latur!' They would no more brand us as thieves and look down upon us. Bhau would ride on a cycle wearing pants like a sahib. These were my dreams, and I was happy to see and relished them.

Since the brothers separated and lived apart, looking after and keeping me was a problem. So I decided to live in the boarding at Babhalgaon. One of my school-mates had told me that the students belonging to the Scheduled Tribes and Backward classes were not required to pay fees and other charges.

I took a letter from the Headmaster for the Secretary and met him. He was also pleased since there was not a single student in the boarding belonging to the Nomadic Tribes. He invited me to live in the boarding. I told Bhau that I was admitted to the boarding, and that I would live there henceforth. The school was quite some distance away from Dhanegaon and living at Babhalgaon was going to be very convenient.

I told Bhau to buy me a trunk, a plate and a metal jar. Bhau bought for me a wooden box for four rupees, and I went to live in the boarding. There were about twenty student-inmates in the boarding. I joined them. I was on friendly terms with all the inmates very soon. I began to get two square meals every day. I began to go the school on time.

I used to go to Chamle's farm at Dhanegaon to meet my father every Sunday. I used to live with him for a day. My father was a very honest and sincere employee. He never gave me the good sugarcane from Chamle's field. Sometimes though, he would give me half a piece of sugarcane nibbled by rats. He would not allow me to throw the peelings and leftovers around; he would bury them. He would not allow me to pluck even a single leaf from the trees. He was given meals and ten-fifteen rupees per month for his work. He gave me ten-twelve annas as pocket money. He never forgot to keep for me custard apples and rat-nibbled sugarcane, for he knew that I would visit him on Sundays. He would set aside a little *bhakar* from his two meals and give it to me when I visited him.

I felt that Baba was now old and weak, tired, yet he was forced to work for his living. Sometimes he would say to me : 'Take a good education, rise high in life.'

I went back to Babhalgaon on Monday mornings. I was quite happy among my friends in the boarding. All of them treated me with love and affection.

A certain Patil was in charge of the Babhalgaon boarding. I used to observe religious fasts on every Tuesday and Friday and once in a fortnight. This made Patil take special interest in me and treat me differently. On Fridays and fast-days he would take me to his house and offer me snacks made specially on fasting days. I thought how well I had acquired a good reputation for myself. Even such a high dignitary as Patil took me to his house on the days obsevered as Naturally the other inmates of the boarding looked upon me with some respect.

There were two Lingayat students in the boarding. The others were Mahars and Mangs and I was a Pathrut. The sons of merchants never mixed with us. They prided themselves on their higher caste-hierarchy and sat apart for their meals. I, however, sat with Shivaji, Gangadhar Gaikwad of Gaurmasalga.

Sometimes we would find vermin in our *dal* and the *bhakars* would be half-baked. No one ever dared to complain about it. All ate without any protests. Many students,

however, abused and cursed saying : 'They take Government money and give us dirty food.'

I used to go to More Guruji's room. He would give me whatever was left from his meals, because whenever he asked meanings of English words, I would instantly answer for I had leanrt by heart all of the words taught to us. So he loved me dearly. He would send for me whenever he was alone. I used to wash his utensils and take my meals at his house. I studied the subject taught by him very sincerely.

All the friends living in the boarding went for an evening walk every day. There was only one bowl and we used it for drinking water as well as to take with us to the latrine. We used to chit chat in the woods. All thought that I was rather vain and proud and overbearing. The boarders knew that I belonged to the Uchalya community of thieves. They would often ask about our ways of theft, the what and how of the business. I too used to keep on bragging almost with pride of the skills and ways of our community.

Then I would tell them that my brother was a government servant. He had a radio-set. I thought that the words 'Sarkar' (Government) and 'Sahakar' (Co-operation) were one and the same. So I thought that my brother's service was a co-operative service. That was what I had told my friends. My brother had bought a small transistor. Sometimes I used to bring it to the boarding. The students looked at me enviously. They would tell one another that my brother was holding a high post in his service. I felt very happy that they thought my brother a big officer.

I regarded Latur a big city. I had known and seen nothing outside it. Once our History-and-Geography teacher asked us if anybody of us had seen Aurangabad. All said that they had not. I alone replied that I had seen it. The teacher asked me when I had been there. I replied that I had seen it from a bus when I was going to Tuljapur. All began to laugh at the reply. I did not understand why they were laughing. I had mistaken Usmanbad for Aurangabad. I did not understand the difference between the two.

I stayed in the boarding up to Diwali. My frequent visits to

Latur had begun to affect my mind. My father had grown old. Harchanda had stopped his thieving activities. So none of our relatives was willing to keep him in his house. None would give me money to buy books. I kept on thinking that I should take up some job and look after my father.

In the Diwali vacation I quietly picked up my wooden box and came to Latur. In fact, I was eagerly waiting for the Diwali vacation.

As I said earlier no one was willing to take Harchanda into his household. If he went to any one of the brothers, the sister-in-law would kick him out of the house as if he were a cur. They would not give him food for days. He began to starve. So Baba took him to the farm with him. He would share half his meals with Harchanda. When I went there on Sundays, there would be three of us to share Baba's meals.

Chamle's wife gave Baba two and a half *bhakars* at every meal. Baba ate one and gave the rest to Harchanda. Sometimes I would be there. I would be quite hungry and want a good meal. Baba and Harchanda would desire me to join them. But I would tell Baba that I had just had my food. Even then Baba and Harchanda would force me to eat something with them. The three of us often felt that we were refugees and we had no one to look to. At such times the three of us sat weeping on the farm.

On such occasions I felt that I should leave school and take to thieving and maintain Baba and Harchanda. Now I had grown up and understood the difficulties. The employer would sometimes abuse and curse Baba. He would say, 'Do you think I have shouldered the responsibility of maintaining two?' He would sometimes short-supply the daily ration of meals. Baba and Harchanda would then roast and eat sweet potatos. If at times *bhakar* was not sent in time, they would eat spring onions only.

I decided firmly that I would look after the two. With this thought in mind I came to Bhau's house in the Diwali vacation and as I put the box on the ground I told Bhau: 'I've come with the box and all the books.' Bhau took me to task. The sister-in-law was happy to hear me chastised. She did not

say anything because she hoped that if I left school, they would not have to spend money on books and they could stop keeping me in the household. As I began to live with them without doing any work, my sister-in-law began to quarrel with me. She would not prepare meals on time.

The landlady of the building where we were staying belonged to our community. She had parted with her two husbands. Now she was living with one Reddy of the Yellama Caste. She was known as Smt. Jadhav to many people in Latur.

She ran an illicit business. In the beginning she was in the liquor-selling business. It was quite a large business. My sister-in-law and I had gone to her because the landlady and my sister-in-law hailed from the same place and they were closely related. She was living in a very good house. I had not seen such a beautiful house even in my wildest dream.

She had one fixed obsession. She would never allow a person from the Uchalya community in the vicinity of her house even for a minute. We were treated accordingly. I thought that being a rich woman of our fraternity she would have a soft corner for us. I was, however, disappointed for she drove us away. She sent a piece of *bhakar* for my sister-in-law through her servant and with it also a message that we should instantly go away for it was Reddy's lunch-time and he would beat us, if he found us there. We returned home.

The buildings she had built in Latur on the money she amassed in the liquor business are still there. We had never thought that we would live in Latur. Bhau had secured a job in Latur, so it became necessary to hire a room. By then we had became better acquainted with Chandrabhagabai. So we could get a room on hire in her building. She had quite a large and multi-faceted business. Sometimes she would send me to sell milk, and at other times she would ask me to bring husk, oil-cakes and such other cattle-feed. She would give me four-eight annas which I would hand over to Bhau. Thus I spent the Diwali vacation working in Chandrabhagabai's business. I collected about ten-fifteen rupees.

One day Baba came to Latur. He was very run down

because of the load of worries. He begged me not to leave schooling. He said he would sell the galvanized sheets from the roof of our house and raise money to buy books for me. He told me, 'Harchanda ruined his life because he took to thieving. Now he is neither a successful thief nor a good worker of any kind. If I tell him to water the farm he cannot do it even for a day. He falls down anywhere with epileptic fits and creates worries for me. He can maintain neither himself nor me. Both of us starve. How many days can I look after him? The employer has now started cursing and abusing me. His wife has also started reducing our meals deliberately. Now I shall bring a basket for him from Tuljapur. Then he can at least beg *jogva* and eat something.'

Baba took some money from his employer and brought a basket and a string of cowrie-shells from Tuljapur.

We already has in our house my mother's basket and string of cowrie-shells. I used to go round the village begging *jogva* on Tuesdays and Fridays. Because it was believed that the basket of *jogva* should never remain empty, I used to put in it a little grain or flour. There were plenty of rats in the house. They used to eat all the grain or flour and nibble at the basket rendering it useless for anything. So Baba brought a basket from Tuljapur.

While Harchanda was good at thieving, everybody liked him. All the persons in the house showered love on him. But on account of the haunting fear of beatings and frequent attacks of epileptic fits he could not carry on thieving. Baba forced him to go on thieving trips for some. When starvation became unbearable, he gave Harchanda a basket and a string of cowrie-sheels. Harchanda begged *jogva* in the village every day for his living. In the beginning he felt shy and did not beg in our village. He used to go to neighbouring villages or to Latur. As he got used to begging, he began to beg in our village. In fact, the Mother-Goddess's Jogva is demanded only on Tuesdays and Fridays and on new moon days. Harchanda did not abide by this custom. He begged every day. Only we said it was *jogva*.

I was fed up with these troubles and tried to get some

work. I had decided that I would do something so that Harchanda was not required to beg. The poor people of our community lived in a locality on the Nanded Naka in Latur. I started selling bread there. I did it for quite sometime.

As my brother was employed in a spinning mill, many persons used to come from the villages to request him to get them some work in the mill. No one stuck to the job permanently. I used to write applications for these persons. Some persons would get some sort of work. I used to tell some others that they would not be able to get a job as they were too young. Then I thought: if boys older than I did not get a job, how I would get one? So I kept quiet. Sometimes I used to request Bhau, 'Bhau please plead for me with your boss and get me a job.' Bhau would say, 'You're still too young.' I used to keep quiet. I did not know what to do.

Sometimes I used to go round the market and see boys of my age engaged in various types of business. I saw boys selling bananas, salted groundnuts, and mangoes. There was not much profit in selling bread. I decided to sell bananas. So I asked Bhau to give me some money to purchase bananas. He gave me some money. I purchased a basket. I used to buy bananas at eleven to twelve rupees a hundred every morning and sell them at 15 paise a banana. Thus for some days I wandered the streets and hawked bread and then I started hawking bananas crying, 'Bananas, buy bananas.' I sold a few dozen everyday. I could make some profit and put back some money in this business; moreover I got bananas to eat in the bargain. So I thought that it was a better business.

After selling bananas for the day I would bring cattle-feed, oil-cakes for Chandrabhaga's buffaloes. I used to wangle some money out this work. I used to buy a smaller quantity of cattle-feed and oil-cakes than what I was paid for and make some money that way. If there were no meals at home, I would eat in hotels or eat the salty and sweet *bhajis* sold on the streets.

I gained confidence thinking that now, whether my sisters-in-law chose to keep me in the house or not, I would be able to live by my business. I felt that I depended on no one now.

My sisters-in-law would always used to taunt and upbraid me and tell me to get out of their houses. Sometimes they even drove me out. Since I began to sell bread and bananas in the Diwali vacation all the taunts and upbraiding stopped.

In the meanwhile I met some students from my school. They told me that the headmaster had told them to take me by force to meet him, for I had run away from the boarding. The headmaster said that I should be made to pay for the meals I had taken in the boarding and I should be rusticated from the school. I felt that if I went back to the school, they would not make me reimburse the money; otherwise they would catch me in Latur and realise the amount.

I had no money to pay, so I decided to go back to the school and went back to Babhalgaon. Swami Guruji caned me severely and asked me, if I would bunk school again and run away from the boarding. I told Swamy Guruji that I did not want to go back to school. I began to weep. So he stopped caning me.

Than I left school and applied in person for a job in a spinning mill. I was driven away from the mill because I appeared too young. When I went again with another application, a person I met near the gate of the mill told me, 'Go and meet Keshavrao Sonavane. If he endorses your application, they will give you a job.' So I roamed about in search of Keshavrao Sonavane's house. I found out his house. I came to know that he was a minister in charge of co-operatives. I had to wait for him to come to Latur.

One day I went to his house in the morning. I was told that he was in. Nobody would allow me to go inside. I entered the house surreptiously, but I could not see him anywhere. In a way I was quite bold. I was not afraid of meeting anybody. I went from one room to another. In one of the rooms I saw a person shaving. I said to him, 'Oh Saab, I want to meet Sonavanesahab, I want his endorsement on this application.'

He said, 'Well, say what it is you want. I'm Sonavane.'

I bowed and touched his feet instantly, and told him, 'Saheb, I want to work in a spinning mill, they won't take me unless you endorse my application.'

He said 'You're still too young.'

I replied, 'No one is willing to keep and look after me. I would be forced to beg, if I don't get a job. Though I am young I will work well.'

Even while he was shaving he signed on my application and said in appreciation, 'You are quite a clever boy. You speak well.' I just smiled and went out with the application.

The watchman at the mill would not allow me to go in. I told him that I was sent by Sonavanesab. Then he let me in. I went into the office of the spinning master. I was wearing shorts and a half-sleeved shirt. The spinning master asked me what my age was. He did not know Marathi well, nor did I know Hindi well. I had, however, studied a little Hindi in my school, and could manage to reply somehow, 'I am old enough. I will work.' He once again asked me what my age was. 'Sixteen years.' I replied. He said that they employed only persons of 18 years and above. I told him boldly, 'Saab, my age on the school certificate is sixteen, but really I am 18 years of age.'

Then he reluctantly signed my application, and remarked, 'How will such a young boy work?' He assigned me to the Ringframe section. I was the youngest of all the workers in the spinning mill. All the workers called me *Barkya*'.[65]

I began to go to the work regularly. Newcomers received no salaries till they picked up the work. I began to move about learning how to piece the snapped ends of the yarn wound around the revolving spindles. It was difficult to stay revolving spindle for it used to be very hot, and the fingers got seared in attempting to hold it. In attempting to do so, I thought, I would be burnt to death. I tried again and again to get hold of the spindle. I would see others deftly staying moving spindles, and piecing the snapped ends of the yarn. I felt annoyed at my own inability to do the same. I kept on trying desperately.

Sometimes I would be asked to check and put together spindles or lift cotton bales. I worked for a fortnight in this way. When I requested to start me paying wages, I was told

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[65] *Barkya* : Little one.

that as long I could not stop a spindle and knot the yarn, I would not be paid any wages. There were many like me who were trying to hold spindles and piece the yarn. They would struggle for three-four months in vain and then run away having received no wages. They were mostly local boys. All the workers who had stuck to their jobs, were mostly outsiders, who had come from distant places.

When a spinning master came to the section, I would request him: 'Saab, I can piece the yarn now. Please give me a trial.' Sometimes I would succeed in piecing the snapped ends of the yarn, but in doing so I would snap loose the yarn on the adjacent spindles. On seeing this the Spinning Master would go away. I had worked in this way for 125 days. I applied to the boss requesting him to start my wages. The spinning master told me that as long I could not piece the yarn successfully, I would not be paid any wages.

I requested my boss, 'Saab I'm very poor. I've nothing to eat and no clothes to wear, Saab, You're like my father and mother to me. Please put me on the pay roll.' The spinning master said, 'Come, I'll give you a trial.'

My heart began to beat with anxiety and nervousness. I recited the names of all the gods and prayed, 'Oh God, let me succeed in piecing the yarn-ends.' Then I chose a simple, easy-to-operate machine, held the spindles and knotted the ends of the yarn. The spinning master was very much pleased. He remarked, 'The boy is clever,' and wrote on my application that I should be paid rupees sixty as wages.

I was very happy. I thought that now I was a salaried person. I was detailed to the morning shift. My duty began at seven in the morning. I used to get up early in the morning and get out of my house at six and wait before the spinning mill for the 6.45 siren. As soon as the siren was sounded, I would go inside. Now that I had become a salaried worker, I was given heavier work. Much of it was coolie-work. I was required to drag away from the winding section a basket cotaining spindles and bobbins by means of a rope fixed to it. I had to put all my strength into the work. The basket weighed at least 60-70 kilos and I had to pull it without

grumbling. If did not pull it, I feared, I would be removed from the work. So I had to work however difficult the job might be.

I would go to lunch in the recess. After two months I was given the work of a doffer. It involved removing yarn-wound bobbins from machines. I would carry large containers on my head, run along the machines and remove the bobbins. Then I would piece the yarn. By now I had become quite an expert in my work. Prabhakar, a jobber, under whom I worked, treated me with brotherly affection and would often advise me 'Barkya, don't leave the job, stick to it. When you acquire sufficient expertise, I'll promote you to the sider's post (that is one post of assistant to the spinner). I will give you charge of one machine.'

I would put all my heart into the work when I heard such words. I even surpassed much older persons in piecing yarn. I was soon promoted from doffer to tarvala. A tarvala was not much burdened with work. He had to move around and piece the snapped ends of the yarn. I was no more required to lift and carry heavy loads. After six moths my pay was increased from Rs. 60 to 75 per month. I felt that I was now drawing quite a big salary. So I went to Dhanegaon and offered *pedhas* to the Goddess for fulfilling my wishes.

I very much wanted to learn to ride a bicycle. I tried very hard and after a great deal of struggling and countless falls and hurt knees and beating from strangers, I could ride a bicycle a little at last. I was quite pleased with my achievement. I took a cycle on hire and along with Kokane went to the market in Latur. Latur has circular roads. I rode through the circle and took a straight road. I crashed against the watchman of a Dalda Factory. I did not know how to apply the brakes and check the speed. Kokane was quite an expert, so he rode past the watchman went ahead. I, however, dashed against him. The watchman caught hold of me and thrashed me with his chappal. I fell down. People in the market came to my rescue. They told the watchman to let me go otherwise I might die with such severe beating. Only then did the watchman let me go.

I was an ignorant villager not initiated in the ways of city-people. I was charmed to see how city-people lived and wished to ape them in all respects. I had to take severe beatings quite often but I did not give up my dsire to acquire the ways of city people.

Now that I had a good job, Bhau and his wife were quite happy. However, I was sad. Baba, being old, could not work any longer. Who would look after Harchanda? It was Baba's dream that I should get educated and rise in life. I had left the school. How was I going to come up in life? How could I ever get a higher and better job? Such were the thoughts troubling my mind.

When I served there, a certain Patil was the time-keeper in the spinning mill. Once I had gone to him to receive my pay. Patil Saheb said to me, 'L.M. Gaikwad, you're still quite young, why do you work? You should be studying. Why don't you go to school and work as well?'

On hearing this I firmly decided to go to school and work also. Then one day I went to Babhalgaon and obtained the Transfer Certificate from the headmaster. I got admitted to Shivaji High School in Latur. I requested Patil Saheb and got the night-shift permanently. I used to go to work at twelve midnight and was relieved at seven in the morning came home, ate *bhakar* and slept till nine-thirty. As soon as I was relieved, I used to go to school at ten sharp.

The teacher taught us lessons from the texts in the school and gave us homework to be written and shown the next day. The school would be over be five and I would be free then. Having worked through the night, I was often very tired, and I would doze off in the class. I went through the lessons somehow always yawning and trying to keep awake. As soon as school was over, I returned home, dined and slept.

This was my routine. This tight schedule put a great strain on me. I made some friends in the school. My friends lived close to a fertilizer-godown by the Nanded Naka. I lived in a hired room in Chandrabhagamai's building near by.

Now all had a good word for me as I began learning while

earning. I too was happy that I was being held in esteem. I made friends from respectable families. I had friends from the Maratha, Gurav, and merchant communities and they invited me to their homes and spoke cordially with me. I remembered the days when I was spurned and even shouted at : 'Lakshya! Pathruta!' But here in Latur I was addressed as Laxman Gaikwad and that too by Maratha boys. I felt that I had risen in status. What was I once, I thought, look at the respect I am getting now! This made me very happy indeed.

One day I was invited to lunch at Dattu Sawant's house. Dattu's mother was a good, gentle soul. She always spoke with me with affection. Dattu's father, his grandfather, Babu, Dattu and I were served together. I had never seen such fine plates in my life. The house was dazzlingly clean. *pāats*[66] were placed in a line. I was made to sit on a *paat*, I managed it somehow. When a plate was placed in front of me, I was in jitters. It was a bright stainless steel plate with three-four small bowls placed in it.

Rice, *papad* and vegetable were served. I wondered how so many stainless steel plates, bowls, carafes could be there in Dattu's house. I had not imagined in my wildest fantasies that there could be so many utensils in a house. While I was lost in such thoughts, Dattu's mother came and served ghee with a spoon to all of us in a line, and asked us to start eating. I had no idea which item to eat first. I picked up a *pakora*[67]. Dattu was sitting by my side. He nudged me gently and gave a hint by putting a finger on his rice. I understood and put the bare rice in my mouth. Everybody stared at me. I felt that I had gone wrong somewhere. Then I looked at Dattu and saw what he was doing. I saw him putting curry on a bit of rice picking it up in his hand, and putting it in his mouth. I somehow managed to finish the rice in my plate.

I felt as if my hands and feet were paralysed. My hands trembled while eating and twitched as if with nervous shocks. For generations nobody from our community had ever used even a single bowl on his plate for eating. And here in Dattu's

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[66]*Paat* : A wooden plank used as a seat for meals.

[67]*Pakora* : A fried salty eatable.

house I found three-four bowls crowded in a single plate. I could not figure out the proper way of eating the *pakoras*, *papad*, and vegetable. In my usual way of eating food I did not care whether my hands were washed or not, I just took an aluminium plate, instantly put both hands into whatever food there was in the plate, mashed the food, mixed it with curry and put it in my mouth. That was the only way familiar to me. In Dattu's house everything appeared quite different.

At last I resorted to my usual way of eating. Everybody else ate using only one hand. I was not used to breaking small pieces of *bhakar* using only one hand. Moreover, we were served with wheat *chapatis*. I could not tear them into small pieces with one hand. I used the second hand also. I tore the *chapati* into small pieces using both the hands and dipped each piece in the milk and began to eat. Finally I used both hands to eat all the food. There was no method in my eating, I just ate whatever came to hand and in whatever manner I could.

My legs were cramped and they ached while I was eating. The *paat* on which I was sitting hurt my flesh and bones, making me feel restless and uncomfortable. Thus somhow I finished my meals and washed my hands in the plate itself using the water-carafe kept for drinking water. Dattu looked at me furiously. Not only did I my wash hands in the plate, but I also committed another blunder! I took the plate and the carafe outside to wash.

That was custom in our house; after we finished our meals, we took our plates outside, washed them and gave them to the others to eat in. I did not know that people of high castes regarded it below their dignity to wash their own plates. When I took the plate outside to wash it, Dattu's mother said, 'Laxman, you should nor pick up the plate in which you've taken meals, not should you wash it.' I was surprised to hear this and felt that I was being advised as to how one should conduct oneself in a city. In fact, I had taken ash with me, for I felt that since I had been served with an excellent meal, I should clean the plate with ash. When Dattu's mother spoke as she did, I kept down the plate and went into the living room, and sat down. The full picture of the lunch-scenario

was before my eyes. One thought kept recurring in my mind : Look at the ways of these people, where they are and where we are. I often wondered if ever we would reach their level.

Dattu and Babu had finished their meals and come out. Then all of us took betel-nut and aniseeds. I said to Dattu, 'Now let me go. I have to go to the night-shift. I must sleep a little.'

Dattu came out with me and spoke with me on the road. He was angry with my unclean ways of taking food and perhaps thought that he had committed a great blunder by inviting me to lunch. He, however, had no courage to scold me openly.

He simply said, 'Look Laxman, always remember that you are not to use your left hand to eat anything. When you are taking food on festival days, you should put a little water with your right hand round your plate and then put a few drops of it in your mouth. Then put a little curry on your rice and eat it. Not everything but *chapati* should be cut into small pieces with your right hand, and while you are eating *chapati*, eat it somtimes with *pakora* and sometimes with vegetable. And remember very well you are never to pick up and wash your plate. After meals wait for all to wash their hands first and then wash your hands.'

The building in which Bhau and I were living was not a sophisticated one. Everybody addressed Chandrabhagabai Jadhav as *Mahamaya*[68]. All the women in her building were mistresses kept by some people. Chandrabhagabai herself had kept two husbands: One, a permanent husband of Yalama caste, Tukaram Reddy, a suspended police-constable and the other, a Thakur. I fact, Chandrabhagabai had married two persons from our community and had subsequently left both of them.

She prospered well after coming to Latur. Since she bore no child fro her first husband, Reddy, she arranged a second marriage for him. When she went to negotiate the marriage, she told the bride's relatives that she was Reddy's sister; and

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[68]*Mahamaya* : Great mother; here used sarcastically to mean a virago.

got him married to a woman from a poor family.

The second wife's name was Sushila, but nobody called her Sushila. All called her Sushi. She was made to do all sorts of housework. She cleaned the buffalo-sheds by removing the dung, washed utensils, cooked meals and did all odd jobs. Even then Chandrabhagabai thrashed her mercilessly even for a slight mistake. Sushila bore a son and daughter. Both the children called Chandrabhagabai Mother.

The entire household was under the strict control of Chandrabhagabai. She lorded it over all, not even Tukaram Reddy dared disobey her orders. Everything including the plot, the building, the household utensils were in her name. She ran a grocery-shop. She also sold *ganja*[69] tablets, which was an illicit business. The everyday turnover of that intoxicating drug was anywhere between 400 and 500 rupees. It was a lucrative business.

Vaidus, mangs, garudis and lepers lived in that lane. She wielded great influence over these people. She would buy *jowar* from vaidus at a low price and sell it to grocery shops at a huge profit. She would send lepers to Hyderabad and buy *ganja*-grass, for nobody bothered to question and search lepers. She would keep that grass buried somewhere in the house and sell the small tablets she made from it.

There was no latrine in her house. Being very obese she hardly went out of the house. She would relieve herself in a basket and ask Sushi to clean it. She would buy pigs from vaidus and sell their meat as lamb's meat. Since Reddy belonged to the Yelama caste, she took care that he never know of this business. She would serve him every afternoon with lamb's meat. At times I had brought for her pigs' meat from these vaidus. She herself would eat the pork, so no one discovered her clandestine business.

Once a *masanjogi*[70] had come to Chandrabhagabai. She acquired from him a bracelet and two bones. She used these things to her profit. She would pretend to be able to tell people the auspicious time for undertaking important ventures,

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[69]*Ganja* : A highly intoxicating drug.

[70]*Masanjogi* : A quack medico and black magician who lives in a cemetary,

and give sacred ash, and quack medicines. Her medicine was a pinch of fine powder made by blending and grinding *ganja* leaves and basil leaves. Luckily on some occasions her medicine would cure the malady.

It was believed all over that Chandrabhagabai's medicines worked wonders and that even a barren woman could bear a child with her medicines. People from afar would visit her and she would offer them sacred ash and medicine.

Once a woman from Murud had come to ask her medicine and an auspicious time. Her medicine proved effective and the barren woman became a mother. So she sent two hundred rupees in a twenty-five paise postal envelope. The envelope was wrongly addressed. A postman handed over the envelope to another woman whose name was also Chandrabhagabai. She opened the envelope and was frightened to see two hundred ruppees in it. The letter mentioned, 'Because of your medicine a child is born to me.'

The woman who had received the letter was a simpleton. She wept and roamed all over Latur with the envelope. She enquired everywhere for Chandrabhagabai Jadhav, who gave medicines and found auspicious time for people. She often said in fear, 'I don't know what government will do to me. I should not have received this envelope from the postman. I am really unfortunate.'

At last she traced Chandrabhagabai Jadhav; only then did she feel relieved and happy. She handed over the envelope to her and told her, 'Check if there are two hundred rupees; Otherwise I'll be in trouble.' Chandrabhagabai called me and asked me to read the letter. I read it for her. The woman had written, 'Mother, your blessings have given me a child. I am sending one hundred rupees for a sari and one hundred as your fee."

I struck my forehead in exasperation. Money begot money. This woman knew nothing. She got money by moneyorder just for pretending to be medicine-woman. Even when the money came to another woman in an envelope, the woman refused to keep it for herself and traced Chandrabhagabai to give her the amount.

As soon as I read the letter, Chandrabhagabai went into a epileptic fit. Somtimes she used to go into a trance suddenly, and fall into total unconsciousness. This time, however, her jaws and teeth were firmly locked; so much so that no efforts could pry her jaws open. Reddy tried very hard in all sorts of ways but in vain. I also tried to put my fingers into her mouth to pry open the jaws, but the teeth would not get unlocked. Then Reddy pushed into the crack between her teeth a wooden *ulthana*[71] and pried her mouth open, but in the process she lost two of her teeth.

All the people around her were weeping. Reddy was saying, 'Chandra, please don't leave me. You've accumulated all this property. Yor've not yet enjoyed it.' He kept on repeating this and weeping. We all thought that she would die at that moment, but no, she was made of sterner stuff. She recovered after some time. Blood was trickling down from her mouth and she came to know she had lost two of her teeth. But she kept quiet. Her condition was indeed pitiable.

But she did not lose any of her greed and attachment to property. She kept on amassing it. Such was the horrible building in which I lived. That environment not only kept me away from acquiring any decent ways of life, but taught me the lowly, vulgar ways of the unsophisticated.

I learned from Chandrabhagabai all the things that one was forced to do in a city. She kept me from dying of starvation. But if she gave me anything, she extorted its full price from me. If ever I had my meal at her house, she would ask me to boil *ganja* leaves and grind the leaves by putting pepper in them. I would be required to make small tablets of *ganja*. Sometimes I was asked to carry these tablets to Reddy's shop. I had to take great care and go carefully to avoid being caught by the police. She used to give me four annas on delivering the tablets. If I disobeyed her instructions, she would backbite me and cause misunderstanding and quarrels between me and my relatives. Then again she would mediate and bring about amicable reconcilliation.

I had started going to school. I was earning, so friends

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[71] *Ulthana* : A flat laddle used for baking bhakar, chapatis etc.

gathered about me. I began to spend on them. I fell in the company of vagabond urchins. I used to roam all over the city with them shouting and bawling. Raghu Shinde and Manya Gurav were the most reckless dare devils in our gang. They would go into any lane in the city and get involved in fights. I too roamed with them.

One Gargaje was the mafia-chief of the prostitutes in the city. All prostitutes paid him periodical instalments out of dire fear. If any person dared quarrel or abuse or talk insolently with any prostitute, Gargaje along with us would go there and thrash the person. Our gang was also beaten up soundly on many occasions.

Sometimes we would go into hotels for meals and pocket steel spoons. We would often go to Balaji's or Goddess's temple and leave our old, worn-out chappals and come away wearing new pairs.

So it dawned on me that not only people of our community committed thefts, but even boys from so-called good families indulged in them. In fact, in our group it was I who often felt embarassed and kept away on a number of occasions. I used to stand far away, while the other boys of the gang indulged in thefts. Thus I passed my days. My school and duty continued.

Now almost all the people from that lane knew me. I went on overtime duty sometimes. It was impossible to sleep in Chandrabhagabai's building in day-time. There was always a crowd of women and children and a resounding hubub. So I used to sleep in the shade of the government godown nearby. As I used to return from the duty dead tired, I could sleep soundly even in the mid-day sun. I would not be even aware of the scorching noon sun.

There was an engineer's house in front of the godown. The house was quite a big building. A beautiful girl lived there. Whenever I went to sleep near the godown, she would look at me and smile. Whenever she smiled, it pleasantly tickled my mind. That such a beautiful girl from a rich family should smile at such a ragged boy like me sent thrills of pleasure through me. Then I began to pretend to be asleep as long as

she stood in the window looking at me, and I always responded with a smile, when she looked at me. If anybody happened to look at me, I would instantly pretend to be asleep. The girl, with her every-smiling face, had turned my head.

My routine was now fixed. As soon as I would return from the duty, I would retire to the godown to sleep. The girl would come and stand in the window. I became absolutely restless.

One day I started to go to the school at ten, she too was going to her school at the same time. We met on the road. I yearned to speak to her. I trembled with nervousness not sure whether I should venture to speak to her not. I had no courage to utter a single word. She too felt like speaking to me, but she too was nervous and frightened.

At last we just managed to look at each other, smiled and parted. That day both of us failed in our courage and did not speak. I turned to go to my school and she went her way. While going she raised and waved her hand slightly, I also raised my hand and proceeded to walk towards the school.

My mind now converged on that girl. The image of her smiling face with a raised hand danced before my eyes. I could pay no attention to what the teacher was teaching in class. Every day I dozed in the class during the lessons, that day, however, sleep had vanished.

It was rare once-in-a-life-time thing that a beautiful girl from a rich family had fallen in love with me. I was bubbling with happiness and all sorts of dreams filled my life. I was so eager that I would wait impatiently for the school to be over, so that I could fly to her and speak. I always thought of what I should speak to her. I had firmly determined that I would speak to her sooner or later.

One day instead of going by the usual way I chose the road going past her house. I passed along that way but I could not see her. I went home, had my meals and again came to her house. She was waiting for me at the window. I looked and waved at her surreptiously and she reciprocated.

The next day again we met each other on the road while

going to school. This time we walked close together. She took courage and asked, "What school do you go to?"

She asked the question and my heart fluttered and throbbed. I could not compose myself enough to answer her question. I answered with the shyness of a newly-wed bride, 'Shivaji School. I'm in the ninth standard. I've a job in a spinning mill.'

Then she asked me my name. I told her. When I asked her name, she told me: Shobha Jagtap. She also told me that she was in a government school for girls. In fact she was much bolder than I in speaking. When I looked at her, I saw a gold locket around her neck and a ring on her finger. Her clothes displayed fine quality. She looked very beautiful with her soft lotus-like feet.

On looking at myself I realised that not only were my clothes coarse, they were also dirty. My palms were worse than the soles of her feet. I was just wondering how on earth I would be able to forge a love-relationship with her, when she asked me, 'Come, keep company with me up to my school.'

I walked by her side and spoke my mind. I frankly told her, 'Shobha, I'm very poor. You appear to be very rich. I don't know what people would do to me, if ever they saw us together.'

She retorted, 'What will they do? Why should we bother about them?' My head had now fully turned. I was madly in love with her.

Now we started going together, every day. We exchanged love letters. Once she had written a very touching letter in which she had quoted lines from a Hindi love lyric: 'Wherever you may be, dear, let your life be happy. When two hearts join, dear, what need we have to fear?'

I showed the chit she had written me to my friend Moti Gurav one day. I said to him, 'Look, this girl loves me. She has written me a letter.' He read it. I knew nothing about love-relationships, nor knew what one should speak or write when in love. I handed over the chit to him to draft a reply for me. I knew that Shobha being attractive and beautiful, many boys were after her. Moti was one of them, and used to

go after her. Shobha did not even condescend looking at him. Now Moti had Shobha's chit in his hand. He told me that he would read it and give me a reply for it the next day.

He stood on her way to school the next day and asked her, 'Why don't you love me? Why do you love Laxman Gaikwad, that hateful boy?'

Shobha took her *chappal* in her hand and said, 'Will you go away quietly or shall I...?'

Then Moti showed her the chit she had written me and threatened her, 'You better love me or I shall show this chit to your mother.'

She snubbed him telling him to go away, but she was furious that I had given the chit to him. She stopped coming to the window. I understood what a great blunder I had committed. When I met Moti and asked him why he behaved that way, he threatened me with dire consequences.

He passed that chit to her father through her brother. Shobha's father branded her on her cheek with a red-hot spatula. Her cheek showed a big scar where she was branded. I was very sorry that Shobha had to face troubles on my account.

She met me one day and told me how she was beaten. The poor girl was weeping all the time. I too burst into tears seeing the scar on her cheek. Even then Shobha did not stop loving me. She would be restless, if she could not see me. I had just no idea what a love-relationship was and did not know how to respond to her love. I was perplexed and confused. I feared that somebody might murder me. How could I ever love a girl from a rich family? She, however, loved me dearly. She would tell me to put on her gold ring or offer me her locket. But I would always decline to take it.

At last our love-affair was known to all our friends and to her relatives. Shobha came to our house sometimes.

They were stealthy visits. She used to sit talking with my sister-in-law. Her mother came to know of it. All my friends fumed in envy. They thought that they were rich and wore good clothes, yet Shobha did not talk with them, while she spoke with ragged, dirty Laxman.

One day the friends with whom I used to go on fighting sprees, told me that Shobha had invited me and took me to a room. They kicked and punched me and beat me mercilessly all over. Then they threatened me, saying that if I was ever again seen with Shobha, they would kill me. I understood well now what being in love was. I also had my taste of the experience of friendship. Shobha came to know of it later.

I wrote a long letter to Shobha and told her that the difference between her and me was the difference between heaven and hell. I wrote : 'I am so poor that I do not deserve to love a girl like you. We have come closer to each other because of our love but our love is untainted, pure. We would always be closely related but only as brother and sister.'

I handed over this letter secretly on her way to school. She wept bitterly after reading this letter and said, 'Laxman, how could you write such a letter?'

I too was overcome with my love for her, but there was no way out. For had we continued our love-affair, neither she nor I would have remained alive. So I parted with Shobha, drew away from her. But her memory has always remained close to my heart.

She was married to a teacher. She did not forget to send me the wedding card. I did not attend. She met me once after her marriage. Shobha died in her first pregnancy two years later. I wept bitterly when I heard of it. I cannot forget Shobha who, though rich herself, loved a poor boy.

I appeared for the ninth-standard examination in Shivaji School. I failed as I could not concentrate on my studies on account of my job. I had started earning a satisfactory salary in the spinning mill. I did not like that Harchanda was begging for his living. So I brought him to Latur and looked after him. I left school, hired an independent room and lived with Harchanda. I would cook in the morning and go to work. I told Harchanda to look for some work.

As I passed my days in this routine manner, I came to know that recruitment was going on in a spinning mill at Aurangabad. Our jobber, Kankappa, was paying Rs. 200 as an advance of travelling expenses and was taking workers with

him. I thought of leaving Latur and going to Aurangabad to take up a new job. I thought that to travel to a distant place might give me some sort of a new experience and I went to Aurangabad in 1972.

So far I had known Aurangabad only through history books. The art of Ellora and Ajanta tickled the mind with pleasure.

I was getting a chance to go to Aurangabad, so I collected my belongings : One coverlet between Harchanda and me, one durrie to spread on the ground, one utensil for cooking vegetables, an aluminum carafe for water, two plates, a couple of framed pictures of God. I had borrowed some ten-twenty rupees from my brother. When I prepared to go to Aurangabad, my brother insisted that I should refund the borrowed amount before proceeding. He snatched away all my belongings.

I wept for some time. Harchanda and I left for Aurangabad when my brother was away on duty. I remembered my father often in Aurangabad. I felt sorry for leaving my father serving in the village. I was passing my days somehow at Aurangabad.

I did not live in Aurangabad. I had hired a room at Garkheda, a Muslim village, 3-4 kilometres away from Aurangabad.

The spinning mill was close by. I went to the mill with a boy from Vasangaon. We were five-six boys who had come from Latur. We had hired just one room for all of us. Some of us were *taravale* and some, doffers in Latur. All of us were appointed siders in Aurangabad.

We were pleased that we had begun to earn ten rupees a day. Since we were outsiders, we were paid weekly wages. We used to go to Aurangabad for shopping on the Sunday after the pay-day. We used to eat hybrid grain in Latur. It was not available in Aurangabad. Therefore we had to eat *bajri*[72] every day. White *jowar* was too costly for us. Now we became habituated to *bajri*. We used to buy our requirement from Rizmal Sheth's shop and carry it Garkhed.

Hadgi, Bajar, Inglè and I were detailed to one shift, while

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[72]*Bajri* : Jowar-millet

Yesha, Kasha and Bharat of Vasangaon were working in another shift. We who worked in the same shift used to wash our utensils, cook meals and leave the pots and the plates unwashed after our use. We used up all the water from the bucket leaving it empty. We did this deliberately so that the others returning from their shift at mid-night would not be able to cook and would be required to sleep hungry. In turn when we returned at mid-night and opened the door, we would hit against the utensils kept in the door and curse and abuse them. Then we would wash only one pot, cook meals at midnight by fetching water and eat. We too would go to work in the morning leaving the used utensils unwashed.

All of us had forgotten cleanliness at Aurangabad. We had purchased wooden boxes to keep our flour, salt, chilli-powder. This was our routine.

Garkhed was a small village. All the inhabitants were Muslims. As a result I could pick up Hindi quickly. At first, as a newcomer I used to be amused at their ways and language. Even women young and old wore *salwar*[73]. The people of the village took their bath every Friday. We also fell into the same habit. The village was untouched by modern life. It did improve much after the influx of outsiders like us.

As outsiders poured in for jobs, accommodation became scarce and people began to build houses, and rent them out. A liquor-shop and a hotel were opened. Such modern amenities became increasingly available. I too was happily inured to the life in the village.

I formed many acquaintances. There was no harassment here as there was in the Latur Mill. All the jobbers in the spinning mill at Latur caned the workers mercilessly. The work here was not too arduous or difficult. We used to hire bicycles and go to the Daulatabad Fort. Many of my friends spent their wages on cigarettes, tobacco, liquor and betel leaves, and then took loans at an interest rate of ten per cent per month. I had no such habits. So I could easily manage the expenses of a month within my wages.

Once a lecture was arranged in our spinning mill. The

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[73]*Salwar* : A kind of pyjama.

speaker was a person who had visited Russia. He told us that in Russia there was no difference between an employer and an employee. Employees were also owners. The people in Russia were very happy. At the end of his lecture the speaker asked if anybody wanted to ask questions.

I asked him, 'If workers and owners are one and the same in Russia, why is it not so in our India?'

He just gave a casual, perfunctory reply, but he called me to him and asked me my name and noted down my address. He said, 'You're very clever. Keep on meeting me.' I was now known among all officers as a clever worker. The factory manager always asked me about the work. He was also from Latur. His surname was Tandale. I enjoyed his goodwill.

In the meanwhile Sambha-Bhau lost his job at Latur. He roamed all over Latur hawking vegetables. When I came to know of it, I called him to Aurangabad. I took him to Tandalesaheb and got him employed as a skilled fitter in the carding section. As Bhau and my sister-in-law had come, we required better accommodation. New constructions were up in Jawahar Colony, so we could hire rooms at bargain rent. Then Bhau and I lived together for some time. My sister-in-law, Harchanda and I, however, could not live on cordial terms and quarrels cropped up between us. Once again I felt sad and thought of leaving Aurangabad. I took a fortnight's earned leave and went to Latur to meet Baba.

Now two of my brothers—Manik, the eldest, and Bhagwan—were working in the mill in Latur. I went to them. Then I went to meet Baba at Chamle's place. Baba was very happy and said, 'Laxman, my child, you've gone so far away for service, I'm now quite old. I might die suddenly any time, and I'll not be able to see you. Come here now. How many days can I go on labouring? My master also does not look after me well.'

I was furious with myself for failing to look after my father who had given me birth. My poor mother had died in my childhood and I was not able to give any comfort to my father.

The landlady gave Baba the previous day's stale left-overs

and these too seldom of the right time or with any regularity. Baba hardly got two meals a day. Seeing Baba unhappy, I did not feel like returning to Aurangabad. I thought of doing some work in Latur and looking after Baba, and Harchanda. I assured Baba: 'I'll take you to Latur. I'll take up a job there.'

From Baba's I went to Dhanegaon. All those, who had lived there with me, stared at me and exclaimed: 'Fucking hell! This Pathrut's boy now moves about dressed like a saheb.' Others said: 'How poor he used to be.' God has blessed him. Now he works.' Some boys from rich families remarked: 'What works! Fuck in hell! He is from the Uchalya community, will it ever mend itself! Lakshya must be in some thieves' gang, we're so educated and yet we cannot obtain jobs. How will this Pathrut's boy ever get a job?' I was very angry with those boys.

Now nobody from our fraternity lived in Dhanegaon. If I met a Mahar boy or a boy from our community, who was my classmate, he would speak well about me. The reason why I went to Dhanegaon wearing decent clothes was that as a child I had wandered in the village begging for food, passed my days starving. I deliberately went round just to show them that I was living well now. I had purchased terrycot pants for twenty rupees at Aurangabad. The shirt was also second-hand. I had bought second-hand shoes in Shahaganj. Everything was old, but fitted me well. I looked handsome an attractive.

I had to call this place my village because I was born here, but this village had forced me to starve and live a grovelling, ignoble life. Even a Maratha child mocked, 'Lachiman Tata crab-curry khata?' If I happend to touch anybody's vessel, he purged it in fire or touched a cow to wash away the taint of my touch. I had to speak with respect and humility with even a year-old child. This village had forced me to live a slave's life. Nothing but humiliation had ever come my way. Even then, because I was born in this village, I loved it and visited it. I was however, very sad for people's feelings had in no way changed.

I used to greet with respect the elders sitting on a public platform or passing by me on the road. They considered it

below their dignity to reciprocate my greetings and without bothering to return my salutation they would arrogantly ask 'Eh, Pathrut Lakshya, when did you come?' Then I would angrily resolve that once at least once I would come to this village as a dignified person and make these people greet me with humility. With such a resolve I used to assuage my anger.

I went to my father's landlord's house side the village. I bent in obseisance before Kisanmai from a distance. Kisanmai was a gentle soul. She asked her daughter-in-law to prepare tea. She offered me tea in a wooden cup. She said, 'Lakshya, take tea. You've come to meet your father after a long time. Are you married?'

I replied, 'No, not yet.'

I heard you are working now? Martand was telling me : 'My youngest son is working at Aurangabad on a three-hundred rupees salary. Is it true?'

I replied, "Yes, mother. I'm working in a spinning mill in Aurangabad.'

'That's very good. You were an orphan with your mother dead, poor child. You were such a small kid when your mother died. God has blessed you after all your sufferings.'

I came out of Chamle's buildings. I met Tulshiram's sons, Narya and Tukya. Tukya was my uncle's son, we had been friends since our childhood. He asked, 'When did you come, Lakshya?' and invited me to his hut. He spread a ragged home-made quilt for me. He was still living in a hut.

I asked him 'Tukaram, what are you doing now-a-days?'

He said, 'What am I! How can I ever be a saheb like you? I am following in my father's footsteps. There's only one new thing I've done. Come here Sundar.'

As he uttered this, a monkey sitting in the corner jumped on to his body instantly.

Tukya said to the monkey, 'Give your Mama (maternal uncle) your hand!'

The monkey proceeded to put his palm into mine. I understood that Tukya was making a living by showing a performing monkey's tricks in the streets.

Narya was still engaged in thieving and picking pockets.

Then Tukya said, 'Lakshya, stay for a day here. I'll kill a pig for you and prepare lunch.'

I declined and asked him how many pigs he had.

Tukya replied, 'I married a girl from Sonoti. The father-in-law did not give any dowry but he gave me a pig. Now there is quite a large litter of them. I have also kept two-three donkeys. Well, I'm managing somehow. Now I get my meals everyday — no starvation for me.'

Thus I listened to Tukya's life-story. He once again urged me to stay but I declined and left.

Then I visited Anna and Dada in Latur. I met my old friends working in the spinning-mill. I also met my old friend, Kokane, a jobber in the mill. I casually asked him if he would get me employed in the spinning mill at Latur.

He asked me, 'Do you want to serve here?'

I replied, 'I feel like working here, if I can get a job. My father is now old and tired. How many more days can I stay in Aurangabad? I'll have to return to my native place sometime.'

Kokane tried to get me employed. The boss was a gentleman. Kokane told me to put in an application. I wrote an application and went to the mill with Kokane. We met the factory manager. He signed the application and gave me work in a temporary post. I was put in Prabhakar Kokane's shift. I was very happy, for now I would be able to live in Latur and look after my father.

All my belongings were at Aurangabad. After receiving a fortnight's pay, I went to Aurangabad. I resigned the job and collected my dues from the mill. When I collected my belongings and prepared to go to Latur with Harchanda, Bhau and the sister-in-law began to weep.

They said, 'Laxman, because of you, we came all the way here and you're leaving us now.'

I consoled them and explained, 'Father is now old and very tired. I've taken a job at Latur so that I can look after him. I'll try and get a job for you in Latur. Till then stay here.' Thus I came back to Latur from Aurangabad.

I hired a room and lived in Chandrabhagabai's building, the same one in which I had lived before. In a short while I made my father leave his job and brought him to Latur. Now I had to shoulder the responsibility of looking after Father as well as Harchanda. Now my pay was about Rs. 300 - 350 in Latur.

One day I saw a boil on my leg. It swelled gradually to such an extent that the whole of the right leg from sole to knee appeared to be rotting with pus. Lots of medicines were tried but to no avail. The leg would not get cured. Father thought it must be the wrath of the mother-goddess, so he made me observe a fast on Tuesdays.

The now abandoned Jogwa-basket once again came in my hand. I had to limp my way round Latur begging Jogwa on Tuesdays. I was restless with the fear that I might lose my leg and become lame. A lump of fear used to send cold shivers through me.

A person from the Vaidu community had come to Chandrabhagabai to sell *jowar*. My father showed him my leg. He said that he would give a medicine and offered to take his fees, twenty rupees, only after the leg was fully cured. He brought a *tumdi*[74] instantly.

All who were there, gripped my leg tightly. The Vaidu cut a portion from the skin of the leg and made a hole. He applied the *tumdi* to his mouth and began to suck blood out of my leg. I felt very weak. A bowlful of puss was sucked out. It was infested with vermin and clottings. Vaidu showed us the vermin in the puss.

Then he gave us leaves of some herb and told us to grind them into a paste and apply to the wound. I used those leaves and also took some medicine from a doctor. The swelling slowly subsided and the leg came back to normal in about two months. It was saved from amputation. A big scar right from the ankle to the sole permanently marked the skin of the leg, and the skin got stuck to the flesh below.

Had I resorted to religious quackery in the name of the mother-goddess, I would have lost my leg. My leg was saved

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[74]*Tumdi* : A hollow tube used to suck blood out of the body.

because I went to a dispensary and got it treated in time. So I can walk today; otherwise I would be begging in my native village.

That calamity passed. I was run down and became very weak. I begged my boss and once again secured a job in the mill. I had incurred loans. So I began to work in double shifts and increased my income. Father taught Harchand cooking, that spared me from cooking work. Now I did my duty and whiled away my spare time among my friends.

I was contented and pleased with myself, with the thought that, though the youngest, I looked after my father and brother and kept company with decent people. I saved bit by bit and bought a second-hand cycle for two hundred rupees. That saved the trouble of walking to and from the place of work. The superiors still caned the workers mercilessly. If anybody lagged behind in his work in his shift, he was thrashed.

Not it was all over the fraternity that I was holding a good job.

The marriage of my elder sister-in-law's younger brother was to be celebrated at Salgara. We were invited. We all went to the marriage, because relations appeared to be drifting apart for want of periodical renewals through meetings. Distant relatives had gathered at Salgara in large numbers. All the relatives appeared to be involved in quarrels before the marriage ceremony started. Some had drunk to much and were lying intoxicated all over the place. Some others were threatening: 'We'll see how this marriage takes place. The mother of the girl, who is to be married in Salgara, is tainted. She had not yet got herself purified in our panchayat.' Many Panchas from several villages and towns reiterated this. Maruti of Holicha Majkura was in the forefront and most militant in these objections and attacks.

He shouted vociferously that if the marriage took place it would ruin the prestige of our community. The girl's mother's mother had lived with a Maratha. So the girl's mother was born of a Maratha father. Even if she herself had married a person of our community, the earlier taint was not

thereby washed away. The time fixed for the performance of the marriage-ceremony passed, yet they would not allow the marriage to be solemnised.

The relatives of the bridegroom and the bride had willingly and happily come together and negotiated the marriage, but the panchas had poked their noses in and stopped the marriage. If the marriage were solemnized without their consent, there was the impending fear of ostracization. At last words clashed in bitter quarrels and the marriage was totally forgotten.

The Panchayat sat under a mango tree. The Panchas came out with their proposals. Some said let the woman eat shit, some others said let her be fined 2000 rupees, while some others proposed that her nose be cut off. Finally one of the Panchas proposed a viable middle course that the bride's mother's head be shaved. The Panchas agreed to this proposal unanimously and it was decided that the woman's head would be shaved.

My head went numb with all that I had witnessed. How backward and superstitious could our community be! What a horrible scene was I witness to! On one side was the advanced urban society and on the other, our community-panchayat. I found the functioning of the Panchayat obnoxious and disgusting. I was, small fry, however, before this gigantic social monster. If I dared say anything, they would explore my own lineage to its roots. I was not yet married. If I said anything in opposition, father would curse me. The community would refuse to give me a girl in marriage because I opposed the community-panchayat. So I mutely watched whatever was happening before me.

Once this arranged marriage was called off, the daughter would reamin a spinster all her life, no one from the community would accept her. Haunted with this fear the bride's mother came and sat in front of the Panchas. She bowed humbly before all the people present. Her husband sat as if he was a cold corpse.

At last one of the Panchas brought a razor, wetted the woman's hair with water and began to shave her head. The

woman's heart wept mutely in her agony. The sin of the mother was visited on the daughter. Even while the husband was alive[75], the panchayat shaved her head clean. Not satisfied with that, the Panchas smeared her head with ochre. The bride's mother had pushed the end of her sari into her mouth, lest her weeping be heard.

Thus after the Pancha's decision was executed, the marriage-ceremony started. The poor mother of the bride covered her head with the end of her sari so that nobody should see her shaven head, and sat at one end of the marriage pandal and sobbed and wept bitterly, while the marriage was solemnized at the other end. The Panchas were offered a pig and liquor because they had justice to the case.

The Panchas, dead drunk with the liquor and full with the roasted pig, were enjoying themselves in the revelry. People had offered them good things to eat even though they had viciously shaved the head of the bride's mother. I was totally helpless, for my father was one of the Panchas. As yet I was not a totally changed person. Some of the community-beliefs and superstitions still clung to my mind. Hence I just kept quiet. People were, however, watching me. They were discussing whether Martanda's son looked quite alright as a prospective bridegroom, and exploring the possibility of a marital alliance with me. Thus ended the marriage at Salgara and we returned.

On returning to Latur we felt that we should change our father's name. It was Martanda. We found it embarassing to write Martanda. Our brother began to write Maruti instead of Martanda. Since then we re-named him Maruti. That became his permanent name.

I resumed my duty in the spinning mill. I was tired of the life in Chandrabhagabai's building. I no longer liked the ways and the standard of life obtained there. So my friend and I began to search for a room elsewhere. Everywhere we were asked our caste. If we told our caste, we did not get rooms. So I bluffed at one place in Salegalli that I was a Maratha by

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[75]*Even.. alive* : According to the Hindu custom a woman's hair is not shaved off as long as her husband is alive.

caste. Only then I could secure a room. We moved from Chandrabhagabai's place to this room. We spent some happy days in Salegalli. My elder brother, who was also working in the spinning mill, lived near by. Whenever the in-laws of Bhagwan-Bhau came to Latur on their thieving business, they stayed with my brother. My brother's father-in-law, Sopana was closely related to us. He had four wives. One of them was Elava. She was a versatile thief. Whenever Elave accompained her husband to Latur, they collected no less than four-five thousand rupees. We too had a good time when they stayed with my brother. When the haul was good, meat and liquor flowed freely.

My brother's brother-in-law also served in the same spinning mill with me. We lived in the same room. Shiva (that was the name of the brother-in-law) never lacked anything. Whenever his father and mother came on their thieving trips to Latur, they showered him with money, clothes. I too was often the recipient of these blessings.

Shiva's father, Sopana, was known to all the police in Usmanabad district as the most versatile pickpocket and lifter of goods. He had contacts with the police in Latur, Ambejogai, Udgir, and wherever there were big markets and fairs. The moment the police came to know that Sopana had a windfall-earnings in pickpocketing, they would come searching for him all the way. Whenever Sopana met the police, he threw big parties for them.

If ever Sopana slipped away without giving the police their dues, the police would apprehend him on the bus-stand where he would be looking for a pocket to pick, and carry him with them. They never bothered to register a case against him, just demanded a thousand or five hundred rupees. His wife would go to Jawali and bring the amount demanded, and give it to the police; only then would the police release him. The police never harassed him. Sopana often told us that if these dogs were given money, they never harassed you. On the contrary they supplied you as much tea and as many *bidis* as you wanted. If Elava was ever caught while snatching necklaces and lockets from women's necks, our brother and his wife

would go to Jawali, give money to some farmer and furnish bail and security to get her released.

Elava picked ornaments from women's necks and stole parcels from markets. She never attempted to steal without imbibing a drink. She needed liquor every day and always smoked *ganja* and *bidis*. People said that had she cared to save her earnings, she would have built a five-storey building. She spent all her earnings in drinking, paying the money-lenders and bribing the police of the place. Shiva and I wore the clothes given by her, while we were working in the spinning mill. Sometimes we went with Elava to crowd around in cloth shops.

Once, on a *Padava*[76] day the market was densely crowded. Telling us that she would buy clothes for us, she took Anna, his wife, Shiva and me to the market. We entered a crowded shop. Elava made the attendant show a huge pile of clothes. We were looking through a pile of clothes. In the meanwhile Elava put a big bundle of cloth in her bag. Then she looked about for a while, made a sign to us and went out of the shop.

Elava ran through lanes and by-lanes, while I took Shiva with me and went by another road. We were happy for we expected to receive our shares. By the time we reached home, Elava had already arrived. She asked us two rupees for liquor, which we instantly gave her in the fond hope of getting the cloth. Elava went to a liquor shop in Salegalli and had her drink. Our minds were filled with the idea of having stylish pants stitched for us.

Whenever we were assigned to night shifts, we slept at noon. Otherwise it was difficult to work at night. We would doze while working and our fingers would be seared by the hot, revolving spindles. On that day, however, we did not sleep a wink. We were after Elava all the time. We knew that if she had no money for liquor and bidis, she would steal and sell the stolen stuff at throw-away prices. We feared that if we were away on duty, Elava would sell all the cloth; so Shiva and I decided we would not report for duty that day.

After she had her drink, we used our sweetest tone to

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[76]*Padava* : New year day according to the Hindu Calendar

cajole her into giving us a piece each for pants. Even then Elava charged us ten rupees per piece as her entertainment expenses.

We took the Khaki-coloured cloth to a tailor. He told us that it was terrycot and the stitching charges would be higher. We were overjoyed to hear this. We went to Elava immediately and purchased clothes for two more pants from her before she came to know of the high quality of the cloth, and stitched two more pants.

We wore the pants when we went on duty. Earlier we used ordinary cloth costing hardly 4-5 rupees a metre. Workers thought that we must be from well-to-do families, for our clothes were far superior than theirs. How could one afford such clothes in our pay? We told our colleagues that we were Marathas; so we could wear our posh clothes without arousing suspicion that they might have been stitched from stolen stuff.

Elava was not dependent on any one kind of thieving. She would steal anything. She would lift bundles from shops, pick pockets of grown-up men in large fairs, cut necklaces, mangalsutra, *vajratika*, *bormaal*[77] from women's necks or pilfer gold earrings from children's ears. Elava was agile enough to cut with her teeth gold ornaments of women. She said that she cut a gold locket with her teeth because being gold it could not be cut with a blade.

Sopan always remained by her side. They went together on stealing trips. Both the husband and the wife could not steal without drinking liquor. Returning from distant thefts they sometimes quarrelled over their shares. Then they drank together and quarrelled again.

Elava would ask her husband, 'Sopana, I brought piles of ornaments. What share did you give me out of them?" Then Sopanya would answer back, 'Ele, I brought you as my mistress, yet I take you with me as I would a wife. Whenever earnings have been plentiful, I have given you your share willingly. Even then you quarrel with me.'

In fact, Elava was Sopana's fourth wife. She was abducted

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[77] *Vajrtika & Bormaal* : Different types of necklaces.

because she was a versatile thief. Nobody knew what her caste was. Sopana's two earlier wives did not leave their houses. They both had children, and they lived apart. Sopana gave them equal shares from his earnings. Sopan had three wives living. He married again only after the death of his first wife. His dead wife was my elder sister.

Sopana earned very well from thefts. Moreover his earnings increased after he brought Elava to live with him. Elava did not live with his other wives. Later on when a son was born to her, she started going on thieving trips alone without Sopana. Whenever Elava came to Latur, we were always after her. We got our shares out of Elava's earnings. We often felt that thieving was a more lucrative business than our service, and that we should go into it.

Once Elava picked bracelets and two bundles of brand new cloth from a market in Latur. She kept the articles in Manik-Dada's room. The police traced her to Salegalli and confiscated the articles. Elava ran away. The police arrested my sister-in-law. My sister-in-law never indulged in thieving, she knew nothing about it. My brother and his wife were poor and whoever came to them with stolen goods gave them five-ten rupees. Moreover, they got good things to eat. Hence they allowed these thieves a temporary refuge. This time, however, the police traced the address unerringly and caught her with the stolen goods. The police threatened and grilled her on the spot. She admitted that Elava brought the goods there.

When Manik's wife (our sister-in-law) was arrested, Anna pawned his wife's gold necklace with a goldsmith for four hundred rupees. The police had demanded the amount not to register a complaint and file a case against her in the court. In fact, Anna's wife was Elava's step-daughter, even then she pawned her gold necklace to save her sister-in-law from a public scandal, and purchased her freedom for 400 rupees.

Since then we became notorious in that lane. Everybody began to point fingers at us as thieves. I resolved that I would not go that way again. I would not be seen in the company of Elava any more. I would not allow her to enter my room.

The step brothers Shiva and Babushah were the sons of Sopan and extorted money by sweet cajolings whenever Elava earned something from her business.

Babusha's marriage was negotiated and arranged some days later. The bride was from Solapur. Babusha's parents were, however, against this marriage. Babusha earned quite substantial wages in the spinning mill. He worked in the winding section. He was without encumbrances. Our Anna took the lead and decided to arrange the marriage because Babusha had liked the girl.

Babusha's marriage had, however, already been negotiated and arranged with another girl by his parents. And they insisted that he should get married to the girl they had chosen.

Anna, however, fetched the girl from Solapur to Latur and the marriage was solemnised at night in the absence of his parents. Babusha's parents did not like it and there was a niggling quarrel, but they were helpless, as the marriage was an accomplished fact. Anyway the couple is living a happy married life now.

I too felt like getting married. In fact, early in my boyhood I was engaged to be married to the daughter of Bhadagaon's Tukaram. Tukaram had thought that after my marriage with his daughter, he would turn me, his son-in-law, into a versatile pickpocket. I, however, began schooling, and she was married to somebody else.

Later on there were engagements with a girl from Jawali, and then with another girl from Ganur. However, no marriage ensued from these engagements.

Then a marriage alliance with a girl from Jagalapur was being negotiated. I had only heard of it. The negotiation had taken place with my brother without my knowledge. Anyway nobody had ever bothered to ask me about my intentions.

Chingu, a girl from Kavatha was a versatile thief. Moreover, she was a close relation of ours. Her relatives asked my brother and started marriage preparations straight-away. The girl had been taught the art and craft of thieving right from her early girlhood, and she had had no schooling at all. The

marriage between me and this girl was fixed. I too felt inclined to go through with it for I thought that if my wife were a good thief, we would have two sources of income. Chingu had made full preparations of the impending marriage.

One day she was asking at Lingappa's house in Kavathe about the probable expenditure involved in the celebration of a marriage. Lingappa's own daughter, Chhabu, was of marriageable age. So Chandrabhaga, Chhabu's mother, asked Chingu who her bridegroom was. She told her that the bridegroom was from Dhanegaon, a well-educated boy serving in a spinning mill.

Chandrabhaga's mind was now deviously occupied, and a keen competition ensued. She chided her husband, 'I have been telling you to find a well-educated match for our Chhabu, but you haven't done anything about it. Now go, I hear there's one at Latur.' So Mahadu and Kisan, Chhabu's brothers, came to Latur. It so happened and they were already well acquainted with my brother Manik-Dada. They requested my brother to settle my marriage with Chhabu.

Our Dada was very pleased. He consented instantly, without bothering to consult other brothers. Anna, on the other hand, saw the daughter of his step mother-in-law, who was Babusha's sister, and fixed the marriage. Moreover, he gave his solemn word to the mother-in-law that he would get Laxman married to her daughter.

Thus both the brothers had neither consulted me nor discussed things with each other before negotiating my marriage. They had negotiated two separate marriages with two different girls. The result was a bitter quarrel between the brothers. Dada insisted that Chhabu, the girl from Kavatha, be preferred as my wife, while Anna and Bhau voiced their preference for Babusha's sister from Jawli.

It is a custom in our community that the boy who is to be married is never consulted or taken into confidence about the match. The young one must not act too smart and meddle in matters that the elders are supposed to deal with affairs with his over-smartness. That is the custom. So I had kept quiet all along.

Dada came to me and said, 'Look, the girl from Kavata is pretty and fair. Her family has landed property. Her sister's husband is going to be an engineer. They are ready to foot the entire bill of the marriage expenses. Above all they would demand no price for the bride. We could go to the marriage with an empty purse, and would not be required to spend a single paisa on the marriage ceremony. I am doing all this for your good, but Bhagwan wants to tie you up to a girl from his wife's family.'

I was persuaded; if Dada was of the opinion that the marriage with the Kavatha-girl was a good proposition, then let the marriage be solemnised with her.

Then Anna and Bhau tried to dissuade me, saying: 'Laxman, don't listen to what Dada says. They are distant strangers, we will be ostracized. Better a girl coming from our close relatives - our aunt's daughter. They are prepared to give whatever you demand. They say that they would give you capital for opening a grocery shop, if you do not want to serve in the spinning mill.'

Now I was in a quandary. I did not know what to do. In a way I was living separate from my brothers. I knew that none of my brothers would spend a single paisa on my marriage. I alone would be required to incur the expenditure.

I asked my father, He said, 'You take your own decision. I've no personal interest, but don't marry into the circle of close relatives. They would not respect you, though they may speak sweet words now.'

Since I was living separately, I was free to take my own decision. I though that the family from Kavatha had landed property and the prospective brother-in-law would be an engineer, so the marriage with the girl from Kavatha was a better proposition. I told Manik Dada to fix the marriage with the people from Kavatha.

Dada was working as a sweeper in the spinning mill. So we four brothers lived in Latur while only Sambha-bhau was at Aurangabad. Since I was not married and was looking after my father and Harchanda, the eight sheets of galvanized tin on the roof of the hut were allotted to me as my share of the

family property. Now they were placed on Chandrabhaga's house. Whenever Dada had to go to Kavatha, he demanded money from us, and I kept on giving it to him. When matters regarding the engagement were settled, would all be required to go to Kavatha once for the *kumkum*[78] ceremony.

Anna and Bhau were, however, displeased. They refused to go to the engagement function. They still insisted that I should marry the Javali girl. I told them that I was now determined to marry the girl from Kavatha. In fact, I had not even seen that girl. I had relied on Dada's word to take the decision.

Dada had no money to celebrate the *kumkum* ceremony. Since he was a thief by pursuit, he indulged in drinking and merry-making. He proposed that some tin-sheets from my share of the family property be sold. I ultimately accepted his proposal, and told him to do the selling. Dada asked me to give a note for Chandrabhaga permitting him to take the sheets. I gave him the note and left for work.

In the meanwhile Dada sold all the eight sheets by auction instead of two as he had given me to understand. He told his wife to prepare jaggery-*bhakar* and bought a sari and a blouse for his daughter. He had received a substantial amount from the sale of the tin sheets. So he immediately bought for himself a dhoti and shirt, and left for Kavatha even before I returned from work.

Dada showed his great concern for my marriage by selling the tin-sheets. He spent all the money on himself. I asked him, 'Dada, why did you sell all the sheets?' He retorted, 'Can a marriage be performed on nothing? I'll have to wear good clothes to go the prospective in-laws' place. No? Shall I go with torn, ragged clothes? What'll they think of your standing or mine there?'

This was Dada's attempt to explain away his spendings. I said to myself that Dada was trying to deceive me as he deceived strangers when he was on his thieving business. I, however, kept quiet, for I was feeling happy that I was going to get married.

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[78] *Kumkum* : A formal engagement ceremony preceding the final marriage ceremony.

The date of the solemnization of the marriage was fixed finally. I thought I should go and have a look at my prospective wife before marriage as most of my friends had done. So I went to Kavatha on a cycle with my friend.

Uchalyacha Kavatha is about seventy kilometres from Latur. On our arrival there we were well received and treated with great hospitality by the prospective in-laws. There was some trouble however. The party from Kavatha with whom a marriage-engagement had been negotiated and settled crowded round us and started a quarrel. They said, 'You've already agreed to marry Chingu, our daughter; how can you take another girl in marriage? We'll call the community-Panchayat.' Finally our in-laws settled the issue and somehow pacified the irate persons of the earlier engagement. I was pleased to see the end of the quarrel.

The prospective in-laws had now quite a soft corner for me in their hearts and treated me with great affection because I had visited their place to see their daughter.

Seeing a girl as one's prospective beside was for me a novel experience and I was as shy about it as a girl woul be. One of my sister-in-law was educated, so she decided that the meeting and the seeing the girl ceremony would take place in a modern way.

Two *paats* were brought. I sat on one and the prospective bride was fetched and made to sit on the other opposite me. I began to perspire with nervousness. I could not think of what I should ask her. The girl felt extremely shy, so did I. She was looking down and not even for a moment raised her head to look at me.

I asked her, 'What's your name?'

She said, 'Chhabu.'

Then I placed five rupees in the plate in front of me and kept on sitting mum. A thrill of happiness passed through me as her elder brother's wife asked if I wanted to ask anymore questions to the girl. I just shook my head to say no. Then the girl left.

I stayed with my would be in-laws that night. They cooked meat. I had never imbibed liquor and tobacco since I started

serving. I now think that they must have resolved to make me drink that day.

In other communities people very carefully enquire if the boy, who is being sought after as a match for their daughter, is addicted to drinking and such other bad habits.

At the in-law's place, however, I was forced to drink. I vomitted as I could not stomach the alcohol.

The next day many people invited me for tea. Whenever I looked at a girl, I wondered if she was the girl I had seen the previous day. For I had not had a good look at her in my confusion and shyness. At last we decided to return to Latur.

My mother-in-law to be told me, 'Look Laxmanrao, you're my son-in-law. Now you're like a son to me. Do not pay heed to what anybody says. Otherwise we'll feel insulted.'

I assured her, "Nothing of the kind'll happen. Don't worry.'

The people from my in-law's party came to the boundary of the village to see us off. I met many young boys in Kavatha. I had heard it said that all of them were versatile pickpockets. When I saw them I noticed the fine and costly clothes they were wearing.

I had borrowed my friend's clothes when I visited Kavatha. I had purchased a second-hand pair of shoes and socks from a market of second-hand items. I was trying to show that I was holding a good job. I was, however, nowhere near those boys in matters of dress.

When I returned to Latur all my brothers began to abuse me, 'You harlot's pimp, you went to see your wife before marriage! We're also married. You should have seen her without their knowledge at least.'

Finally the date of the marriage was fixed. There were still fifteen days for the marriage. Even so my in-laws came to Latur to purchase bridegroom's clothes for me in order to keep a firm grip on me and not to keep me slip out of the marriage. For the first time in my life costly clothes were bought for me. The material for the suit cost Rs. 250 and the pair of shoes, Rs. 60. The cloth for the suit was given to tailor to stitch a suit for me and the shoes were brought home. Now

the in-laws from Kavatha began to visit me at my room in Latur.

In the meanwhile the aunt from Jarali came with her daughter to Anna's house. 'Laxman must be married to her daughter,' she told him. 'Or she would commit suicide.' She threatened to break her head at our door and die. She would not budge from his house and also sent for my eldest brother.

The aunt told Dada, 'Look Manik! I've washed your arse-hole. The stench from it is still in my nose. I've done for you all that can be done. Now don't cast me off. Marry my daughter to Laxman. Ask whatever you want. I'll give Laxman five tolas of gold, build a house for him in Latur. I'll give him whatever he demands. Tell me what more do you want?'

The aunt gave them liquor to their hearts' content that day. My Dada's weak point was liquor. As soon as he imbibed liquor, he assured our aunt, 'I'll see how Laxman dares disobey me. I negotiated and arranged the first engagement, and I'll be the one to break it.'

Dada had once gone fishing, there he drank and came back with an engagement fixed.

Now I was mature and wise enough to understand these things. Dada, Anna and Bhau, began to persuade me in unison, 'Laxman, listen to us, it's good for you. Aunt will get closer to you with this marriage.'

I still firmly declined to go back on the first engagement. aunt urged again, 'Laxman, your uncle has picked up some gold in his theft. I'll make you a gold locket. Listen to me.' .

I replied, 'Look aunt, I've given my word to them. They have stitched colthes for me. The marriage is hardly eight-ten days away. Even if you promise me a gold bed, I'll marry the girl from Kavatha.'

Aunt began to rant and weep. She feigned a hysterical fit and fell down. So my elder brother, who had negotiated the engagement and had advised me to marry the girl from Kavatha, now began to advise me, 'Marry our aunt's daughter. She's offering a bigger dowry. The people from Kavatha will only shoulder the marriage expenses, nothing

more. If you refused to marry this girl from Jawali, we would tie you and force you to marry her in Latur.'

So all of them decided that since Laxman was not willing to obey them, they would forcibly make him go through the marriage. They were annoyed because I was not willing to follow their advice.

Now I was in a fix. Only father was on my side, but he was old and helpless. I knew that since my aunt had brought her daughter with her in Latur, I would be forced to marry her. So I pretended to surrender to their wishes and said to them, 'The people from Kavatha have bought clothes for me.' Then they suggested that I should go and return the amount they had spent. So under the guise of returning the clothes and money, I went to Kavatha. I apprised the people there of the happenings at Latur. They too were frightened.

I assured them, 'Don't worry. Even if all my brothers refused to attend the mariage, I alone would certainly come for the marriage. Go ahead with the preparations.' Thus they were assured.

I did not meet my brothers for three-four days. I sent a message through an emissary; 'I'll die but not marry another girl.' This silenced my brothers. After waiting for sometime, Aunt from Javali returned to Javali, weeping. Bhagwan-Anna was, in a way, a shrewd man. Finally, it was he who said to everybody, 'Let Laxman do whatever he wants to.' Thus all were reconciled and prepared for the marriage.

My marriage was celebrated neither at our house nor at the house of our in-laws. I had no house of my own, so it was decided that my marriage should be celebrated along with the marriage of my mother-in-law's sister's son. In other words my marriage was to be celebrated in the arrangements made for that marriage. So marriage invitations were despatched.

No one from my side offered to bear any of the expenses of the marriage ceremony. I took loans from ny friends and the credit society and set about the preparations. Anyway no expenditure on my part was involved in the ceremony itself. The in-laws had agreed to foot the marriage-expenses, and I was not to give any price for the bride.

My brother-in-law, Kisan, was quite a cunning person. He was used to going on thieving trips, so he knew well how to trick people. He called me aside on the day before the marriage and said, 'Brother, we're passing through difficult days. Please use clothes from your house for the presentation of the customary gifts of honour.'

I believed him readily and decided that I would show no mule-like obstinacy insisting on such gifts.

All the people from my house were ready and we decided to travel in a bullock-cart to the place of marriage. The marriage was to be solemnized the next day.

Harchanda was subject to frequent epileptic fits, so we did not take him to the marriage. We kept him at home to watch the house. He said, 'Let me come to Laxman's marriage,' but we left him at home to avoid any awkward situation arising out of an untimely fit.

We could not secure a bullock-cart, so we went to Panchincholi by an S.T. bus. From there we proceeded to Yeli on foot. As we were hungry, we halted at a wayside farm, cooked food and took our meals. When we arrived in Yeli, we were received at the border of the village and were taken in a procession with a band in attendance to the place where the ceremony was to be hold. A room was placed at the disposal of the bridegroom's party.

There was a lot of hustle and bustle and din. For along with my marriage two more marriages were being celebrated. The place was crowded with wedding guests. As for as your eyes could reach, you saw groups of people like community Panchayats dotting the scene. Liquor cans were being opened one after another, and large quantities of liquor were being downed in a ceaseless orgy of drinking. Old quarrrels were being brought up.

On one side the bridegrooms were being applied turmeric powder and given ritual baths. In our bridegroom-party Anna's wife, angry and frustrated as her sister from Jawali had been rejected in favour of the girl form Kavatha, excuses for saving and quarrelling. As excuse was found in that our father was not honoured specially as the bridegroom's father with marriage present.

Our party began to clamour and complain, 'Why was a marriage-gift not offered to the bridegroom's father? Is the bridegroom's father dead? Is this the way the bride's people treat us?' Everybody began to blame me, 'This bastard wanted to marry the girl from Kavatha, even when we were shouting: 'No, not this one.' Now let the mother be fucked.'

It was father who finally pacified our people. He said, 'Why do you quarrel over clothes? Come off it.'

The auspicious moment of the solemnization of the marriage came near. My friends from the mill had come to the marriage on cycles. Dattu was married first. Then the preparations for my marriage started. I was lifted and carried to the raised platform of the the Maruti temple. At one spot the in-laws from both the sides exchanged betel-nuts and embraced one another in a close (neck-to-neck) fashion.

Then I was dressed in the clothes given to me as my marriage present. I was happy more on account of the fine suit of clothes than on account of the marriage itself. I had been given a fine suit of clothes. I had put on shoes, trousers and a shirt that was tucked in. I was looking very handsome. All people around remarked that I was the most outstanding and handsome of the bridegrooms.

Then I was brought to the marriage pandal to the accompaniment of musical instruments. All the invitees had received rice as *Akshataa*[79]. Thus I was married with great fanfare.

Anna's wife took up cudgels against me and my wife after the marriage ceremony. Shiva and Babusha of Jawali joined forces with Anna's wife and violent quarrels ensued. They would freeze in anger and start a cold war. My sister-in-law persisted in abusing and cursing me. She said, 'This bastard's marriage is nothing but trouble.' On hearing this Anna beat his wife on the spot. People then stepped in and tried to pacify matters.

The marriage presents were being given. Our Dada sat to

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[79]*Akshataa* : Rice smeared with vermillion. It is showered on the bridegroom and the bride at the auspicious moment of the marriage with the chanting of ritual hymns.

receive the marriage presents on my behalf. When a present was given, the giver's name and the present given were announced on the mike. I was then very much enamoured to speaking in a mike. I was just an immature, raw young man who did not know how to conduct myself. Whenever a present—gift article or money—was given, Dada used to receive it, and I announced it on the mike. When a stainless steel glass was given as a present, I felt elated as though something lending substantial support to my married life had been received. I took the gift money from Dada in all that hubbub. I had received about thirty rupees. I had to shoulder the responsibility of the travelling expenses of the wedding-guests. So I kept the amount with me in my pocket.

A marriage-procession was taken out in the village at night. The towel on my body was tied in a knot to the end of my wife's sari. I walked ahead and my wife followed me. At the time of seeing the *Rukwat*[80] a quarrel errupted once again. I had to offer fifteen rupees to witness the *rukwat* of honour. Thus ended the last rites and the marriage-ceremony was over.

My wife came to live with me after the marriage and we stayed for about four-five days with Anna. I received my pay in a few days. My sister-in-law had spent some money in my marriage. So she started quarrelling right from the time I went to stay with them.

She complained, 'You were happy to get married, now your wife is close by you, why don't you pay back the amount we have spent for you?'

I gave some money from my pay. Anna warned me that since I had failed to marry her sister, his wife would give me this sort of treatment. We stayed for two more days with them. My sister-in-law purposely made her work very hard though my wife still newly-wed bride. She always found some excuses to start a quarrel.

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[80]*Rukwat* : Rukwat is a special presentation in marriage from the bride's side to the bridegroom. It consists of various items: eatables as well as utensils and other articles useful in married life. It is always a prestige-point between marriage-parties.

At last I decided to go to my own single-room tenement and begin my married life there. So I shifted to my room with my wife one day. I had only a few, odd articles to start my married life with: a couple of aluminium broad-brimmed plates, some carafes, some bowls and a wooden vessel for kneading flour. We started our family life with this capital.

My wife's grandmother also lived with us. So four persons—the three of us and Father lived in a single room. Harchanda lived sometimes with me and sometimes with Anna. The room was small, barely requiring three and a half tin-sheets to cover it. I paid a monthly rent of twenty rupees for it. We could not make both ends meet. There were marriage loans, and the Society loan to repay. The Society loan was being recovered through deductions in my pay and I received reduced emoluments after the deduction. We could not buy a sufficient quantity of even basic necessities such as flour and salt.

Seeing how difficult life was for us, Father prepared to go back to Dhanegaon. No one else was willing to accommodate father in his house. Father had just begun to have some sort of scanty refuge living with me, but seeing that we had fallen on hard days he willingly went back to Dhanegaon and took up a job.

Though my getting married was a blunder on my part, I pleaded with him, 'Father, don't go to work. Live here with me, we will manage with whatever little I get.'

Father said, 'No, Laxman. First you arrange your family life, make for yourself a decent living. Pay back your loans. I shall return to you eventually. Nobody is prepared to look after Harchanda, so you look after him.'

Whenever my wife's grandmother volunteered to go away seeing how hard life was for us, my wife wept. Since we had only a small single room, I felt shy to sleep inside, close to my wife, and slept near the door of the room. My wife and her grandmother slept in the room. Sometimes the grandmother would tell me to go inside and she would sleep in my place near the door. Though I desired very much to sleep near my wife, I was very shy of the grandmother's presence, and slept

near the door. I called my wife's grandmother *Maami*. She would awaken me and sent me in every day and would sleep in my bed at the door. If it rained, all of us slept in the room. If in addition to rain we also had guests there would be sleeping all over the place, some lying by one's legs and others touching one's head. There was hardly any space to stretch oneself comfortably. Even if one wanted to go out to take water, one could not do it and had to sleep with the bladder taut with urine.

If a landlord came to know of my real caste, or Harchanda's epileptic fit, I would be thrown out and forced to look for another room. I was used to Harchanda's fits, but the landlord and the other tenants would complain that they did not want that ordeal nearby, and they would ask me to vacate the room. I have changed living accommodation no less than nineteen times in Latur. Even though I used to conceal my real caste, it would be discovered sooner or later.

My wife and I had no separate bedroom for us, though we were a newly married couple. My wife had not yet attained puberty. Yet Maami, her grandmother, would tell us to sleep together. My wife was around fourteen or fifteen years old. We spent some days in this way.

Since the room we were living in, was too small for us, I hired a room in a Thakur's building. It was a slightly bigger room with electricity, tiled-floor, and four tin-sheets covering the roof. The monthly rent was forty rupees.

In fact, the previous landlady was a good woman. She did not want me to leave the room, but she could not live with Harchanda's fits. Moreover the room was rather small for us.

All our household articles could be accommodated in a single gunny-bag. I carried them to our new room. Now my wife and I had an opportunity for much better and improved communication. We could talk and think together. My wife, hailing from a rural background, was not wise to the ways of the city-life. She was illiterate. Since her mother-tongue was Telugu, she was not used to speaking in Marathi. I understand and speak Telugu a little, but I have never been completely at home with it. So I had much difficulty in communicating

with her in the beginning.

Sometimes I would tell my wife to bring *rockel*[81] and *jalan* from the market. She would ask, "What did you say?' Then I would repeat what I had told her. I suspected that she was hard of hearing. If I said something familiar to her, she would, however, understand very well. Then I realized that I must use the word, *Sarpan*[82] for *Jalan* and *Ghaslet* for *rockel*. That was how I had to experiment with language.

Our marriage was now a month-and-a-half old and there was a reasonable rapport between us. The Jawali-people were, however, absolutely determined not to let me live in peace as I had rejected their girl. We—my wife and I—had no idea whatever of the vicious, underhand dealings they were capable of. When I left for my duty at the mill, my sister-in-law would visit my wife and maliciously backbite about me, telling her all sorts of evil things about me. Babushah and Shiva of Jawali also started to vitiate my wife's mind against me.

This resulted in quarrels and misunderstandings between my wife and me. I became touchy and suspected my wife without any rhyme or reason just because she stood outside the room for a while. I started beating her mercilessly. My sister-in-law would add fuel to the fire by telling me that Chhabu was not a woman of good character, we should not have accepted her in marriage. That would fan my anger and rouse me all the more against Chhabu.

I would sometimes return to the room in the middle of my duty on some pretext or other just to see what my wife was doing when I was away on duty. I would check if she was at home or had slipped out somewhere. My wife was, however, invariably at home. My sister-in-law had told me such abominable lies about my wife that I had started to hate my wife. I contemplated throwing her out of the house.

I had come home once, and my wife was not at home. Shiva's maternal aunt was living close by in another building. My wife was there talking with Shiva's landlady. I went to my

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[81] *Rockel* : Rock-oil, Kerosene.

[82] *Sarpan, Jalan* = Firewood

sister-in-law's place and asked where Chhabu was. She replied as though to rub salt into my wound, 'She might be in Shiva's room talking with him.'

Shiva was, in fact, my sister-in-law's brother. Even so she did not mind indulging in such gossip-mongering. I broke off a stick from the nearby tamarind tree and hid it behind me under my shirt, close to my back. I sent word to my wife to come to the sister-in-law's room. She came accordingly and sat there quietly.

My sister-in-law often used to tell me that a wife's place was at her husband's feet, much like the chappal's that's worn on the foot. I too felt that if my wife looked at anybody, I should gouge out her eyes. To add to my suspicions and torment that day I had found, on my arrival home, that my wife was at a neighbour's place instead of at home. As she had dared to visit somebody without my permission, I was terribly furious. Moreover my sister-in-law had added fuel to the fire and inflamed me. My wife was sitting right before me. I whispered, 'Go back to our room, the rats are moving about and eating the *bhakar*.'

She went home. I entered after her instantly and closed the door after me. She began to weep. I brought out the raw stick from under my shirt and thrashed her so mercilessly that she rolled at my feet and pleaded, 'I've done nothing. I touch your feet.'

I, however, continued to beat her with that raw stick, wherever my hand led. While I was beating her, Anna knocked at the door. I opened it. My sister-in-law (Subabai) was standing outside. She said, 'Beat her, Laxman. Don't be afraid. I'm here to back you. I won't allow the Kavatha people to enter this lane.'

In the meanwhile my wife ran out of the room. Anna abused me roundly and said, 'You're newly married, why do you beat her, treat her like an animal?'

My wife was crying, 'Oh mother! I'm dying.' That was the first time I had beaten my wife. I brought her back again to the house to prepare meals. She too meekly came in, afraid of a fresh beating. Somewhat contrite, I tried to speak with her.

My wife is quite fair. The long scars left by the thrashing and the blood-red back moved my heart. I felt very sorry. I felt that I had beaten her senselessly for no fault of hers. Yet whenever I remembered the malicious slander poured into my ears by my sister-in-law, I used to get furious and all my love for my wife would dry out.

The next day I went to my work. It was a day shift. While I was away, my sister-in-law, advised my wife to run away, not to live with me any more. Frightened of merciless beatings and persuaded by my sister-in-law, my wife picked up a sari and a blouse and ran away. She was quite new to Latur and knew little of the place. She went to a relatives of hers in Latur.

My sister-in-law, trouble-maker that she was, sent a man to the mill to inform me that my wife had eloped. By the time I reached home, my wife's relative had brought her back to our house. I was even more angry with her and once again beat her. She suffered the beating meekly.

Next day her brother arrived. He told me that he had come to take his sister with him. He was quite firm about it. I refused to send her with him. The brother was, however, quite sensible. He tried to persuade me in a sensible sane way: 'You're just married. Such things do happen. I'll take her with me now and send her back after a week.'

Even my wife, Whom I'd beaten so much and so cruelly, assured me, 'I promise to come back in a week. Please send me now. I remember my mother. I very much want to meet her.'

Her idea was to go away and not to return. But I kept quiet, letting the matter run its course. My brother-in-law now began to entreat and beg Anna to send her with him. So Anna also told me to let her go. At last I sent her with her brother.

My shift changed. Shiva and I now worked in the same shift. We used to go together to the mill. In the meanwhile Shiva and Babusha had quarrelled. Babusha was Shiva's step-brother. Shiva was to be married to a girl from Kavatha. Shiva was on good terms with me.

'They are not sending my wife back. I'll tell her when she returns,' I once told Shiva.

Then Shiva explained to me everything. He said, 'Laxman, don't beat *akka*[83].' Shiva was a Jadhav and I, a Gaikwad. So he called my wife akka.

When I told Shiva what my sister-in-law had told me about my wife, Shiva explained, 'It's not true. Now I'll explain all to you. We deliberately vitiated the relationship between you and your wife and caused quarrels between you two. It was our intention that you should not live happily together, that you should throw out Akka and Akka should not return from her father's house. Your sister-in-law deliberately told you evil and slanderous things about your wife. She would purposely call your wife away, so that she would not be in the house when you returned from your work; and that would infuriate you. When you beat Akka in your anger, we would tell Akka behind your back that you were a dirty bastard and that she should run away from you. Thus we kept on backbiting both of you. Our plan was to marry you off to Babusha's sister after you had thrown your wife out. Matters are going to be worse now. So don't listen to anybody. Keep your own counsel.'

The explanation threw a flood of light on the whole affair. I clearly understood that these very people were playing with our life. Since then I exercised caution. I sent my brother to bring my wife back. One of her brothers, who was in the thieving business, was still annoyed with me. He sent back the message : 'Let him come. He beat our sister so much that the long scars of the lashings were visible for eight days. Everybody in the house wept to see them. Even animals are not beaten as mercilessly as he beat my sister. I don't like it. Who does he think he is. A landlord? I'll not send her unless he himself comes here.'

So I went there. My mother-in-law was weeping all the time and said to me, 'Don't listen to anybody. Your married life has just begun. You should live decently and happily.'

Then I stayed with them for two days. They made new

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[83] *Akka* : Sister

clothes for my wife and me. They sent her grandmother with us when we returned to Latur.

Now I began to treat my wife well. I explained to her everything, how people had told me slanderous things about her. She also told me that she was advised not to live with me but run away. Now we began to live with much discernment and caution. Our relations improved and became cordial. Maami—her grandmother—also lived with us.

My wife's grandmother hunch walked her back when she I asked her once why she walked like that. She told me that police beatings had broken her back. She narrated her story.

"I had a son, Ram by name. He was a versatile thief. While your wife was still a young girl, he had cut and picked a pocket. He got ten thousand rupees from it. The police came to know of it. About 25 to 30 police constables and an Inspector descended upon our village. They thrashed us all, kicked us with boots, and trampled on our prostrate bodies. They grilled us to tell them where we had kept the money.

The money was buried in a deep hole underneath a tree in the woods. The entire village was besieged by the police. I had gone to relieve myself early in the morning wearing a bonnet-like long covering. The police came to know that I had gone out of the village. So they pulled out all the women from the house and beat them vehemently with sticks. Nobody told them where the money was. All the boys had run away.

I was beaten severely and thrown down a raised stone platform. They grilled me to tell them where the money was hidden, but I didn't tell. My father-in-law was then quite a well-to-do person. He ran a grocery shop and also kept a sewing machine. The police confiscated and sold all the commodities in the shop and destroyed everything. Even then the police could not trace the amount they had come for. We purchased some land with that amount and also gave some of it to the persons in the village to keep their mouths shut.'

That old woman and my father-in-law have been permanently disabled by the police beatings.

Now we were living happily. There was, however, one pain in the neck. Anna declined to maintain Harchanda.

Prone to frequent epileptic fits, Harchanda did not work. As per Father's wishes I did not allow him to beg but asked him to fetch *bhakar* and *dal* from our village. Father used to give him food tied in a piece of cloth.

I could not make both ends meet in my pay. I had to buy lot of necessities on credit from shops. Shop-keepers gave things on credit because I was in service. My all pay would be spent in paying outstanding dues; and once again the difficulties of the whole month would stare me in the face. With the addition of a wife the household expenses had gone up.

I was tired of looking after Harchanda. Though I was his younger brother, I used to abuse him for no working; sometimes I would beat him or rush at him in anger. Sometimes he would work as a helper under a mason and bring home five-ten rupees. But he would fall down in fit while working. So masons were reluctant to give him work. Father used to pay us visits in Latur once in a while. He used to enquire about the state of affairs. I would complain against Harchanda bitterly. Then Father would beat him out of frustration. Once I even told my wife not to serve meals to Harchanda, unless he worked somewhere.

Harchanda would go to the market, steal and eat bananas or such things that he could lay his hands on. He was, however, very unwilling to do any honest work. How long could I shoulder the responsibility of looking after him? I could not manage to fulfil even my own needs. So I told Harchanda in a fit of frustration, 'Don't beg and live here. Go somewhere and die.'

The landlady would not allow him to sleep outside the room. She would ask us to leave her house. One day it was raining heavily. Harchanda would usually go out surreptiously and sleep outside. But that day being afraid that we would beat him and send him out of the room in the rain, he stayed in the room and locked it from the inside. My wife was sitting with the landlady.

When I returned home from duty at mid-night, I came to know that Harchanda just would not open the door. He kept

mum inside and would not respond at all to our exhortations that he open the door. At last he said, 'Laxman, you must not drive me out of the room. I'll open the door.'

When I assured him that I would not drive him out in the rain, he opened the door. I was furious with him. I abused him roundly. Out of seething anger and frustration brought on by poverty I said to my very own brother, 'Go, get out, die. Or beg and eat. Let me not see you in Latur tomorrow, otherwise I'll hand you over to the police. The police already have your name in their list of thieves.' That really frightened him and he prepared to go.

I tied his clothes in a bundle and though he was very reluctant to go, I pushed him out in the rain. While going he begged, 'At least give me our mother's basil beads and basket for begging Jogva, I'll go. I'll take this wretched face away somewere and will never return to you.'

I brought the beads and the basket from the room and gave him. He went. Ten years have elapsed since, but he has not returned. Out of poverty and inability to maintain him, I drove out of my house my very own brother permanently.

I abandoned my own brother. This has weighed heavily on my mind. I have wandered far and wide in search of him. I have visited Kurduwadi, Barsi — have looked for him in the crowd of beggars, but I have not been able to find Harchanda to this day. I do not know whether he is alive or dead. Whenever I remember what happened, my heart sears as if branded with pain. What wretched calamities have descended upon me because of poverty! I could not look after my very own brother; he and I have parted for good. I believe he is dead by now.

I had been living in the Sake Lane for a considerable time. The other tenants in the building were unwilling to speak and deal with us decently because of our poverty. I thought of leaving the place and shortly moved to a room far away from the town.

One day I visited Father. He was very ill. I thought of bringing him to Latur. I had not been able to trace the

whereabouts of Harchanda. I thought that I must at least look after Father and forced him to come and stay with us at Latur.

Anna also volunteered to share the expenses of looking after Father. Father came to Latur rather unwillingly. He could not sit around doing nothing; it bored him. So he began to make jute muzzles for cattle and sell them in the Latur market.

Then I too thought of doing some business on the side to supplement our income. I decided to run a vegetable shop at home. I purchased vegetables worth fifteen-twenty rupees, and asked father to sell them. He was, however, unfamiliar with weights and if a customer asked for a quarter kilo, he would give him almost a kilo or half-a-kilo. So not only was there no profit but we incurred a loss. Then I asked my wife to sit with Father and help him. She too was uninitiated in the business and quite ignorant in the beginning. But once she and father acquired experience the business began to yield good profit. I accepted a permanent night-shift so that I could get time to purchase vegetables in the mornings. That helped to supplement my monthly pay considerably and the situation eased a little.

With the vegetable-business running smoothly, I began to get weary of the mill-job. Cotton particles hanging in air would fill and choke the lungs, and many workers would often fall ill. I thought of leaving the mill job many times.

At homes in a display of our manliness we abused our wives; in the mill we received the same wretched treatment ourselves.

Our supervisors would beat and abuse as if we were their wives. If a machine was found unclean, the worker working on it would be beaten and sent home. If we returned late from mid-day meals, we were beaten with raw sticks. We were allowed only fifteen minutes for lunch. Though by regulation we were given half an hour, we were often called back much earlier.

Many were such tortures heaped on the workers. We often felt that we should form a union and put a stop to such cruel treatment. If anybody dared to do such a recalcitrant deed, he

was immediately dismissed from service. So nobody dared take a lead in this matter. Even if the machine was found a little unclean, I was immediately packed off to the depot for an ordinary worker received only four rupees while a sider, a person working an a machine, received seven rupees as daily wages. The jobber favoured only those who curried favour with him and threw parties for him. He would detail them to the machines.

This brought in a lot of corruption and nepotism. On many occasions jobber-supervisours had forced me to wash their lunch-boxes. I used to get infuriated; but I was also helpless. There was always the lurking fear that if I indulged in anything rebellious I would be instantly fired. If removed from the job where would I live? I had no hut to live in even at my native place. As it was I was afraid of even going to Dhanegaon. I would either be forced to work there as a farm-hand or be compelled to resort to thieving and picking pockets. This impending fear forced me to keep my mouth shut, though my mind fumed and fretted against injstice.

A person who had come to Latur from a distant place, was working as a sider in our mill. His name was Ramanna. He had made me a sider.

One day while taking lunch I asked him, 'How many places have you worked in?'

'I've worked in Gokak and many other places, but in no mill is there as much harassment as there is in the Latur Mill.'

'Why is it so?' I asked.

'There the leaders of mill workers do not allow such injustice,' was his reply.

'Ramanna,' then I asked him, 'what would happen, if I were to take the lead and fight against this injustice?'

He said, 'If you'll do such a thing, all workers will carry you over their heads and dance.'

Some days passed after this talk. The vegetable-business was yielding good profit. I was no longer mortally afraid of losing my service. So if a jobber tried to beat me, I would retaliate by looking back at him in visible anger.

One year the Labour Day and Maharashtra Day were

being celebrated on May 1. After the procession a meeting of the workers was held in the canteen, the manager asked us if anyone desired to speak on the occasion. None from among either the workers or the office staff was prepared to do so. I mustered courage, stood up and asked the manager if I might speak. All the workers stared at me. The manager gave me permission. I had conqeured stage fright in my schoot days having made many speeches then.

I went and stood near the table, where the bosses of the mill were sitting. I was trembling with nervousness; but I began my speech, 'Our whole body functions because its different parts such as the arms, legs, stomach, head, do their allotted work. Similarly here there are workers in the mill and managers and bosses in the office. Even though their allotted functions are different, all of them together make the mill. We should all do our work and behave with this idea well entrenched in our minds, and help bring to reality the dream of Mahatma Gandhi.'

While I was going back to my place all were clapping in appreciation. The manager again stood up and presented me eleven rupees because he liked my speech very much.

Now jobbers and supervisors began to commend my courage; they said, 'Laxmanrao, you delivered a good speech. We're afraid of even going near the bosses. You stood near them and delivered a speech. You are very lucky for you're in their good books.'

Now all the workers knew me as one who could directly approach the manager and report to him if anything was amiss. Jobbers now began to give me work on the machines. I was, however, very much conscious of all sorts of injustice perpetrated against the workers.

Jobbers often beat workers and drove them away withour marking their presence at work; tore thier cards if they happened to be late by a couple of minutes; forced them to sit at home for over fifteen days without pay. Even if a worker had worked for eight full hours, his presence was marked only for four hours.

All these things had been deeply etched in my mind.

Though the condition of the workers was so miserable, no one dared say a word in anger or retaliation.

Workers used to sleep during night-shifts. Sometimes even the sound of the siren would not awaken them up. The sound of the machines in motion was so deafening that visitors put their fingers in their ears. They would hold handkerchiefs to their noses so that they would not breathe in cotton particles suspended in the air all around. If a worker at one machine wished to speak to another worker working at another machine, he had to whistle and communicate with gestures. In that deafening noise we used to sleep in the blow-room, covering ourselves with a coverlet.

Even in such great noise we slept impervious to it like dead bodies. If we could get up at the sound of the first siren, it was alright; otherwise the jobber would go sound thrashing every sleeping worker with a raw stick before the second siren was sounded. The strokes of that thick stick used to be so sudden and painfully smarting that one woke up with all one's senses numbed and crazed.

If even after this anybody was found sleeping, the supervisor would kick him and abuse him: 'Get up you bastard! Fuck your mother! You guzzle and sleep like a buffalo! Who will work? Your father?'

Such were the abuses and beatings we had to suffer just to fill our hungry bellies. All the workers cursed and abused the supervisors, but only in their absence; no one dared say anything to their face. Sometimes novices and apprentices were beaten so cruelly that they would stop working and when the shift changed, come back with five to ten gangsters from outside, beat up the jobber, and run away.

One day a machine was not cleaned and I was on in the night-shift from 11 p.m. to 7 p.m. I had not slept during the day. I fell asleep while working at the machine holding the yarn in my hand in the ringkeam.

Jadhav, the supervisor, came there. Small wads of cotton were hanging all over the machine. I did not even notice that he was standing by my side. He held me by the neck and pushed me against the machine. My right hand struck against

the machine, the flesh around the little finger was slashed to the bone and the bone could be seen. The wound bled profusely.

Indifferent to it, Jadhav shouted at me; 'Bastard you sleep? Is it your father's mill? Don't you get paid?'

I was then furious with him, but I was helpless; I dared not speak out for my living depended upon the job. He gave me a chit to go to the dispensary for treatment, but no permission to go off duty. He made me clean the machine.

The condition of the workers in the spinning mill was wretchedly miserable. Our Union (INTUC) came only to claim the Diwali bonus. We neither knew where its office was, nor who its office-bearers and labour leaders were.

We had only three paid holidays: 15th August, 1st May and 26th January. I firmly decided that I would speak of the injustice against the workers on the 15th of August.

'Come what may,' said some of the workers to me, 'Laxman, on the last occasion you spoke on behalf of the management and the bosses. Speak now about the beatings we are subjected to and we'll hail you as a man of singular courage.'

The 14th of August dawned. A notice was displayed that next day was a holiday and that all the workers were to attend the flag-hoisting ceremony in the morning. I had done my homework fully on the 14th night and planned what I intended to speak the next day. I went the following morning dressed in clothes that looked well-ironed. More than two thousand workers were in attendance. All had gathered at the spot where the flag was to be hoisted. The manager hoisted the flag and the National Anthem was sung.

The ears of all the workers were all for me. What was he going to speak? For there was no other worker who could speak in public gatherings. The manager asked, 'Has Gaikwad come?' I said, 'Yes sir.' The manager told me to make a small speech. He had liked my last speech, and he thought that the boy was clever and would give advice to the workers. He, however, did not know what I was going to speak on this occasion.

I went and stood near the manager's table and began my speach: 'Our motherland is free now. Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlalji struggled and risked their lives for this freedom. Gandhiji had often said that the poor of this country must live in happiness. But today in our free motherland we workers are thrashed with thick sticks. It is not proper. The manager-saheb may not know that the workers' cards are torn, if they are late even by two minutes. If a worker has put in eight hours of overtime, only four hours are credited to his account. Fourteen-year-old young boys are employed to work unpaid for more than two months. If inspectors visit to check the working of the mill, these boys are concealed in latrines. The treatment that the jobbers and the supervisors meat out to the workers is unlawful and immoral. Manager-saheb, get any amount of work done by your workers, but do not thrash us cruelly.'

While I was speaking, the manager intervened saying, 'You should not speak of such things today.' All the workers, shouted and shrieked: 'Let him speak! Let him speak!' And they began to clap. I was so overcome that I sobbed. I was telling our plight to the manager through my speech as a boy, who beaten outside the home, sobs and tells his mother of his misery.

Tears streamed down my cheeks as I spoke. All listened in rapt silence. Then the manager stood up to speak. He looked angry. On the last occasion, he had given me a present; but it was apparent from his looks that this time there would be no present.

The manager spoke: 'Worker-friends, I don't want to speak much today. If what Laxman Gaikwad has told is true, then it is improper. If any jobber or supervisor is in the habit of beating workers, he should stop it. Work should be accomplished through friendly co-operation. But workers who fail to do their work will not be spared. Just now Laxman said that if the card of a worker is torn because he is late by two minutes, it is not the card, but the worker's heart that gets torn. I will feel not a whit sorry to tear the heart of one worker, if thereby I can save hundred others. Let the

workers continue to work as they have been working so far. They should not listen to anything that is not in their interest. If the workers are being beaten, it should be stopped henceforth.' With these words the manager ended his speech.

Sweets were distributed among the workers. Each packet contained a *balushai*[84] and *chivda*[85]. Some workes tried to take two packets. The ceremony was over. All workers showered adulations on me. Some patted my back in admiration saying 'Oh you brave chap!' The jobbers and the supervisors from all the departments now watched me with a different sort of expression in their eyes.

The work in the mill started as usual the next day. Now the jobbers began to chide me and take me to task even for silght mistakes. If my machine was even slightly unclean, they issued me memos and inflicted fines. This treatment created unrest among the workers. I was now almost a labour leader. Even the older and senior workers saluted me, though I was much younger and their junior. They talked with me with respect whenever they met me. It made me feel good and useful. I felt I should take a stand on behalf of the workers against the management.

Once the mill received a notice that two representatives of the workers be taken on the Managerial Board of the mill. In pursuance of this notice, a directive was put up on the notice board directing the workers to elect two representatives to represent them on the Managerial Board.

All the workers elected me to the Board. One of the jobbers was a staunch supporter of the management. He used to beat the workers and indulge in goondaism on behalf of the mill bosses. Such a hooligan was nominated to represent the workers along with me on the Board. All the workers were very happy that I was to represent them on the Mill Management Board.

Now I began to receive printed notices whenever there was a Directors' meeting. I used to attend the meeting with that

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[84]*Balushai* : A sweet meat

[85]*Chivda* : A salty snack

notice. Uninitiated as I was I knew nothing about taking part in the discussions at the meeting. I felt vain that I had an opportunity to sit close to the big bosses of the mill.

There used to be discussions in the meetings about the market-price of the yarn and the production of the mill. The directors were wary of my presence. Whenever they did not want me to know of any important point under consideration, they resorted to English. Then I would understand nothing. I kept quiet. We were offered fruits and tea in high-quality shining crockery after the meeting. The workers used to ask me, 'Laxmanrao, what did the bosses say?' I used to report everything that transpired at the meeting while on shift duty. I attended many such meetings, but I did not express my opposition on any occasion. I just signed the resolutions and came away.

Even then I had slowly begun to understand the affairs of the mill. I came to know that the mill made a whopping profit, but the workers were being paid miserable wages. Even the bonus paid was far less than the profits and production warranted. I began to study carefully the quantity of the yarn produced every day, the prices at which it was sold, the daily turn-over, and the daily wages of the workers.

Siders were paid 7 rupees; doffers, 3 rupees; and apprentices, 2 rupees as daily wages. There was only one spinning mill in Latur, hence I had no way of knowing the standard wages paid for such work. So I was forced to work meekly. By now all the workers were conscious of their working conditions and were provoked to think. Some workers had worked in other mills before joining this mill. They used to talk of the various working conditions and facilities in other mills.

We, workers, had to put up with a lot of inconveniences and problems. In fact, we were paid miserable wages. Moreover, as soon as wages were paid, workers had to pay their tea-bills to the proprietor of the canteen. The workers had to consume large quantities of tea on shifts to ward off sleep. On the one hand the management exploited us and on the other hand, the canteen-proprietor took unscrupulous advantage of the fact that workers were addicted to heavy tea-

drinking. Instead of sugar, saccharine was used in tea. As a result many workers were affected by maladies.

The mill did not have its medical dispensary to treat indisposed workers. Wages were not sufficient even to meet daily requirements of the household. As a result workers were forced to borrow money at exhorbitant rates of interest ranging from 10 to 15 rupees for ten days. Workers took loans even at this rate of interest to face the acute household problems. On pay-days creditors, shopkeepers, liquor-vendors would stand at the gate of the mill, ready to pounce on their preys. If a worker refused to pay, they would snatch away the money from him. Not a single pay-day was ever free of violence, one or the other worker was sure to be beaten in the quarrel over debts and credits.

The creditors beat the workers, enquiring with the other workers if a particular debtor-worker had passed his pay-packet on to some of his friends. Sometimes workers wriggled their way out through the barbed wires of the fence in the rear of the mill, giving the slip to their creditors. Many workers left their jobs fed up with this tormenting situation, and ran away without paying their debts. Many proprietors of 'hotels' have thrived only on the interests on the loans they have advanced to workers.

Many workers among us were affected by T.B. I have seen with my own eyes many young workers of my age dying of T.B. as they had no money for treatment.

I myself had taken loans and almost half of my pay was being used in paying off the loans. It was impossible to suffer such injustice mutely.

The workers waited eagerly and expectantly for the Diwali-bonus dreaming of buying saris for their wives, and of decent clothes and good *jowar* once in a while. We took loans from anyone ready and willing to advance them in the hope of repaying it when the bonus-money came. Come Diwali and the workers were happy.

That year the mill had made whopping profits. It had broken all records and achieved the top-most position in all of Maharashtra. But the mill-management sniffed out this joy.

They declared a very low percentage of bonus, and half of that too was to be credited to the workers' accounts in the Society. Besides, only permanent workers were to be given the bonus. Temporary workers and apprentices were allowed only Diwali-advances. All the workers were highly displeased. We decided that we would go on strike and demand a higher rate of bonus and an increase in our wages.

We had become bold; and four of us—Ramling Jagtap, Shivaji Patil, Jagannath Dhule and I—met Lokhande and advocate Bhagwanrao Deshpande, who were running the Lal Bawata Union. Bhagwanrao Deshpande was an astute and experienced advocate. He knew what the workers from various other mills were being paid and what we should get lawfully. He was well versed in labour laws and told us of our rights.

We decided to found and organize a union of all the workers in the mill. The Chairman and the Manager came to know of it. They called me and threatened me with dismissal. Even then I decided to go ahead and organize a union.

Finally, my companions and I decided to go on strike for our demands. Advocate Deshpande drafted the statement of our intentions and the list of our demands and one day we called a General Body meeting of all the workers. Advocate Deshpande read before the General Body of the Workers the statement regarding the establishment and organization of the union of the workers of the mill and the list of demands. I still remember the speech I had made on that occasion delineating the harassment and injustice inflicted on the workers of the mill.

I think that was the first step towards the popularity and goodwill I was to attain later. I wept as I spoke of the torture, harassment and exploitation the workers were subjected to. I spoke with tears gushing down my cheeks and anger spouting fire from my mouth. Many workers sitting before me wept with me. All the workers had been roused and they were angry and annoyed. I had just to tell them what to do and they were prepared to go to any extent to do it.

It was decided that we, the five representatives of the

workers, Advocate Bhagwanrao Deshpande, Lokhande and Herker should be sent to Ichalkaranji to study the working conditions and pay-scales of workers in the spinning mills there. We met the Union workers in Ichalkaranji and brought a copy of the agreement they had made with the management.

We studied the difference between the pay-scales of the apprentices, the temporary workers and the permanent mechanics of the Ichalkaranji Mill and those of their counterparts in our spinning mill at Latur. Whereas in our spinning mill seven rupees was paid for two sides, in the Ichalkaranji mill for the same work the wage was thirteen rupees. There were similar differences in many other things.

So we continued with our strike. We demanded of our management that our pay-scales be brought on par with the Ichalkaranji pay-scales. We demanded 12% bonus, permanent jobs for those who had a minimum of three years of service to their credit and double wages for overtime.

Our Chairman and the manager were, however, equally cunning. They were all along engaged in crushing down the workers' strike. But in an unprecedented show of strength and unity, all the workers without exception went on strike. The strike lasted for fifteen days. The Chairman and the Manager were prepared to concede our demands provided we called off the strike and resumed work first. But we were equally determined. We had started the strike with a firm determination that we would not go back to work unless our demands were fully met. So we continued with our strike.

Finally we took the decision to fast unto death in protest. The workers were paid every fortnight, which helped to run the household. Now the strike had extended beyond a fortnight. The workers with wives, children and other family encumbrances had to be helped to tide over the hardship they were faced with. So more than a hundred workers began to go round Latur with tins in their hands in an effort to raise a relief fund for the workers on strike. They would visit markets and other localities and beg and plead: 'Please help the spinning mill workers on strike.'

The Chairman threw his weight around and phoned

merchants asking them not to help the workers. The merchants then hesitated to put money in the relief boxes. The strike had continued for more than a month. It continued through Diwali. The shopkeepers who used to sell goods on credit expecting to be paid when the workers received their wages, stopped selling goods on credit. Loans to workers ceased.

I too began to go through a very difficult time. My wife had to go without food for days. I lived among the workers day and night. Being a representative of the workers I sought help for the workers who were starving, but how could I say with my own mouth that I was starving? I endured everything lest the workers lost their courage and the strike failed.

As a last resort I decided to persuade the workers to go on a fast unto death. As it was we were already starving to death. So a decision was taken in a meeting and Advocate Bhagwan Deshpande served the Management with a notice on behalf of the Union informing it of our resolve to go on a fast unto death.

After the resolution I came home. I used to purchase provisions on credit from a shopkeeper, Patil. I requested him to advance me a loan of ten rupees. I told him, 'We'll get our bonus as soon as the strike is resolved. I shall return the amount immediately I receive the bonus.'

The shopkeeper said, 'You already owe me a substantial amount. Call off the strike as early as possible. The workers say that it's in your hand.'

Though he said all this, he did give me ten rupees. I came home, and made my wife pack her sari and blouse in a bag and told her, 'Now you better go to your father's house. I am going on a fast unto death.'

My wife asked me what a fast unto death was. I explained to her, 'Once we sit for a fast unto death, we'll have to remain without food till our demands are accepted. We're not to give up the fast, even if we die.'

When my wife understood what a fast unto death was, she began to weep. I tried to console her somehow and took her to the bus-stand and sent her to her father's house.

The next day a pandal was erected in front of the Dy. Collector's office and Dhule and I sat for the fast unto death as the representatives of the mill-workers. Some workers joined us in this on the first day. In all eleven workers sat for the fast.

Three days passed. Some of the workers who had undertaken the fast with us had already been starving; as a result in a couple of days they fainted and fell down unconscious. A worker, Swami by name, was on fast in the first round. He had lived only on tea for three days before he undertook the fast. So he had to be admitted to the hospital on the fourth day.

I was used to living without food for days. Even then I was without a morsel of food for five continuous days. The Chairman was not, even under these circumstances, prepared to negotiate and come to some terms.

Now all the workers who had undertaken the fast with me, were in hospital and on saline. I had, however, decided that being the representative-in-chief of the workers I would not go to hospital, come what may. I stuck to my position that if they wanted to give me saline, they had to do so there on the road, or let me die there without being moved. The police came but we refused to go or be carried by them. Our health declined dangerously.

Then a Sikh police Inspector came to us in a jeep. All workers had thronged around to see me. I told the Inspector, 'Let me be treated here. I'll not go.' The Inspector held my hand, 'No brother, don't be obstinate. It's our duty. We must save you.'

I fell at the feet of the Inspector and prayed, 'Let me sit in front of the Collector's office. Let people see our misery.'

The Inspector said, 'Gaikwadji, if the life is safe and sound, any number of conquests are possible. Why do you want to lose your life?'

So the police constable along with the Inspector lifted me and put me in the jeep and carried me to the Civil Hospital.

I told the workers to let some more workers undertake the fast. So some more workers sat in the pandal and continued

the fast-unto-death protest. The condition of the workers who had undertaken the fast was precarious, they were still on saline. Doctors had declared that the condition of Swami and Upsingekar was serious and that their lives were in grave danger.

I was on fast for eight days, so I too was put on saline. I could not get up. If I attempted to walk, I felt giddy and swooned. We were really in a miserable condition. Even then the Chairman and the Manager refused to concede our demands.

One of our representatives, Shivaji Patil, was bold and a man of guts. He told the Manager and the Chairman, 'Look, we have suffered more than enough. Even if a single one of our workers dies in this, we'll not keep you alive.' Thousands of workers used to besiege the houses of the Manager and the Chairman in a big morcha seething with anger.

All the workers and their wives used to throng the hospital to see us. There used to be long queues before the Civil Hospital. I was now fully determined that I would not take food, unless our demands were unconditionally accepted by the management. Several people had advised me, 'Gaikwadji, stop your fasting.' At last on the tenth day of the fasting-unto-death the Manager accepted our demands.

In fact, the Manager belonged to the Wadar Community. He used to send feelers through my relatives and advised me, 'Tell Laxman Gaikwad not to be unduly obstinate. Tell him that it was I who had taken him up on the Board of Directors.'

He had sent B.L. Gaikwad, a closely-related brother of mine to advise me. Gaikwad, would try to persuade me to call off the strike. Then I would explain to him, 'Dada, my work is genuine and honest. Even though we are Pathruts and the Manager, a Wadar, he has stalled and frustrated the workers' demands. He is not only my enemy but the enemy of the workers as well.'

Gaikwad would try to soft-pedal me, 'See Laxmanrao, the final decision is yours! But leave off this fasting. Do that and withdraw the strike; you'll rise to great heights in life.'

However, I would never succumb to such arguments. Finally he said, 'Alright. Now see that you get real justice for the workers. This will give you a great position.' Whatever the inducements and difficulties, I did not succumb to any temptation or pressure at that time.

To win the demands was the greatest obsession I ever had. At last they put me in a rickshaw and took me to the mill. The Chairman, the Manager, we—the five representatives of the workers, and Comrade Bhagwanrao Deshpande sat together and negotiated our demands.

Finally we accepted the management's refusal to pay for the period of the strike. All the other demands put forward by us were accepted by the management. One of the Directors was Shivaji Patil Nilangekar. It was decided that the question of the bonus would be discussed in consultation with him.

As I ended my fast, the Manager ordered lunch for me. I thought they might poison me. The Manager arranged meals for us. Though we had been starving, he callously remarked, 'Laxman, you've successfully fulfilled your determined ambition. I didn't think that you'd continue to fast for so many days. You follow the Gandhian ideology. Remember that you're also one of the masters of this mill. You'll have to make good the loss inflicted on the mill.'

The workers finally won the struggle. Next day the work was started at the mill with the inaugural breaking of a coconut at the hands of Bhagwanrao Deshpande and amid the shouting of slogans: '*Lal Bawata Zindabad*'[86]. Then the representatives were taken in a procession through the city by the workers who were off-duty. We were profusely garlanded.

There was a substantial rise in the pay-packet of the workers. Winds of joy wafted all around. Agreements were signed between the Management and the workers. We founded the Workers' Union Office in the mill compound. Since the Union was not yet recognised, the agreement was signed by the representatives. We negotiated with the management in consultation with Bhagwanrao Deshpande.

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[86] *Lal Zindabad* : Victory to the red flag.

Now work at the mill went on smoothly. The workers had secured considerable security in their working conditions. The meeting on the issue of the bonus was arranged on the arrival of the cabinet-minister, Shivaji Nilangekar. I too received the notice of the meeting, and I attended the first meeting.

The discussion started. Nilangekar Patil tried his best to persuade me to his point of view. He said, 'Look Gaikwad, listen to me. You are also one of the masters of the mill. If the mill is to be kept efficiently working and not rendered sick, there'll have to be some cut in the percentage of the bonus you're demanding. We'll give workers eight and a half percent bonus.'

I stuck to my point with the minister, for I had nothing to fear now. I argued boldly and with confidence, for the workers were strongly united and firmly behind me. Finally a ten, percent bonus was agreed upon. We had demanded twelve per cent. I called the meeting of the workers and explained to them the discussions in the meeting. Then I took my colleagues with me and signed the Bonus Agreement.

The meeting was over. The Directors used to receive fifty rupees as allowance for the meeting. That day also all except I received the allowance. I asked the Manager, 'Saheb, you pay allowance for the meeting to all. When I also attend the meeting of the Directors' Board, why am I not paid the allowance?'

The Manager decided to pay me the allowance. Not only was the decision to pay taken, but I was also paid the allowance on the same day at the strong insistence of the Union. I asked the management to reimburse the allowance for the meetings held in the past. I received five hundred rupees at one time as a lump sum for all the past meetings. That was the first time in my life that I had seen such a big amount.

All the workers were paid considerably large amounts. They received from 1000 to 2000 rupees each. But we could not celebrate Diwali at the usual time that year. The workers celebrated Diwali after the regular calendar-Diwali. They vied

with one another to invite the representatives to lunch to their homes. The workers really loved us.

We collected union-fees from the workers. Gradually misunderstandings began to vitiate the atmosphere of camaraderie among the representatives and quarrels cropped up. There was a bitter controversy over Ramling Jagtap's excessive expenditure.

Now the Union representatives could not be ignored easily and they were feared all round. Nobody dared beat workers anymore. All the workers were happy now. If any supervisor abused a worker, the worker could force the closure of the department. Those who had often beaten me in the mill were impressed by my new personality.

Bhagwanrao Deshpande now had confidence in my good judgement and respected me as an effective union-worker.

He was a card-holder of the Communist Party of India. I had attended one of their camps and I was slowly coming under the influence of the Communist ideology. Deshpande gave me several books to read and painstakingly explained to me the nature and character of labour leaders.

Reading brought me knowledge and astute commonsense. I kept on reading labour laws in Marathi. The mill was enjoying an unprecedently happy and congenial atmosphere. I kept on demanding several facilities for the workers of the mill at board meetings. I could secure medical facilities for the sick and a canteen for the workers.

The Chairman and the Manager were, however, in search of an opportunity to create disharmony and break the solidarity of the workers. And the Festival of Ganapati came near, sowing the seeds of division among the workers.

The Manager called Ramling Jagtap and told him that the workers' representatives should take charge of the celebration of the festival. The representatives decided that they would celebrate the festival on a grand scale. It was resolved that a day's wage of the office-staff and the workers be taken as their contribution to the Festival fund. I opposed the resolution saying that the Union leaders should not get involved in this affair. But all the others were unanimous in their resolve.

The contribution to the Ganesh Festival fund was to the extent of 14 to 15 thousand rupees, all raised through a day's wages contributed by the workers. The Manager and the workers handed over the management of the Festival and the fund to Ramling Jagtap. I was also among the organizers.

The Ganesh Festival was celebrated on a grand scale; programmes were arranged by inviting groups from Bombay and Pune. It was decided to prepare a statement of accounts of the Festival and present it to the workers. But an account of the expenditure had not at all been maintained and hence no statement could be prepared. Ramling Jagtap purchased a motorcycle about the same time. Now the Manager saw a good opportunity to sow misunderstanding and break the unity of the workers.

Some of the workers joined the management camp. A controversy errupted over the statement of the Festival accounts. The workers' minds had fed on rumours, and grapevine reports were that they were now suspicious about the representatives. The expenditure to the tune of rupees 6 thousand could not be properly accounted for and the whole thing smacked of fraud. So we, the other representatives, quarrelled with Ramling Jagtap accusing him of causing our being defamed as well.

Then Jagtap began to meet the Manager, begging him to prepare a statement of accounts somehow. The Manager only gave him promises. Some workers were, however, always toadying to the Management. They began to instigate the other workers, who were loyal to the Union cause. These sycophants would remark off and on: 'Your representatives are thieves.' It was apparent that they were trying to spread dissatisfaction and suspicion among the workers.

Most of the workers knew that these were the deliberate Machiavellian tricks of the management. The management tried to bring the representatives into disrepute and let loose divisive forces among the workers. Looking for proper opportunities they began to issue memos to the representatives. Their guns were initially trained on me.

Jagtap and I were issued with a notice of the temporary

suspension of our service. The allegation was: 'You are not sincere and competent in your work, you indulge in goondaism and talk back insolently with the officer-in-charge, you bring obstructions in the smooth running of the mill and use knives to threaten people.'

We waited for a couple of days, having demanded that the management take back the notices served on us, but there was no sign of the management acceding to our demand. So Jagtap and I called upon the workers to go on strike pointing out to them the implications of the management's action. 'Today we are being removed, tomorrow they may throw all of us out. If you want to stop this trend, go on strike.'

Eighty per cent of the workers struck work on our behalf shouting slogans: 'Take back in service Laxman Gaikwad and Ramling Jagtap'.

The situation aggravated. One day I was addressing the meeting of the workers in front of the mill, when Sub-Inspector, Nimbalkar, bought by the management, deliberately resorted to a lathi charge to scatter the meeting and break the strike. The police beat the workers as one would thrash berserk animals. Hundreds of workers were badly wounded. Many of them, trying to run away in a bid to escape the lathi charge, fell in a mire. My friends, Ankush, Mekale and Chawale, were badly wounded.

Pradip Patil and Jagtap and I went to Bhagwanrao Deshpande to lodge a complaint against the police. The police had, however, already broken lamps and glass panes on the mill premises in a bid to escape the charge of unlawful lathi charge. Persons from the management were questioned and were called as witnesses. A criminal case was filed against forty workers including myself, accusing them of assault Sub-Inspector Nimbalkar and breaking his head. We too lodged a criminal complaint against the police.

As the strike dragged on the motivation of the workers weakened. This strike was in no way in the interest of the workers. The earlier strike was motivated by the expectations of a rise in pay scales and percentage of bonus.

This time the management had hired mercenary goondas to

break the strike. The goondas were out to maim me or cut off at least one of my limbs. But some workers were always around me to protect me from any attack. These goondas from Solapur went to the houses of workers, put them in jeeps and handed them over to the police, alleging that they had gone to the mill to set it on fire. The workers were very greatly harassed. How long could the demand 'Take back two workers' representatives' be sufficient motivation for the workers to continue with the strike? So the strike petered out gradually. The workers started joining work. The strike was called off.

The Manager retrenched one hundred workers from service. In the previous strike the workers had benefited immensely. But in this strike the single demand to take back two suspended workers was not accepted, on the contrary, one hundred workers were removed from service along with us.

We filed a case against the Management in the Industrial Court at Pune. Some retrenched workers took up driving rickshaws for a living. I roamed about unemployed. I kept on visiting Advocate Deshpande to enquire about the hearing of the case. One year passed without any result.

One day the Management sent for Ramling Jagtap and Suresh Jagtap and made them an offer that their cases, and along with them, those of some more workers would be considered for reinstatement, if they withdrew the case filed against the mill's management in the Labour Court.

Jagtap was the first complainant while I was the second in the petition filed in the court. Jagtap swallowed the bait dangled by the Chairman and went to Pune and withdrew the case, I did not come to know of this for many days. Even after the case was withdrawn, the management reinstated neither Jagtap nor any of the retrenched workers. It was Advocate Deshpande who informed me that by withdrawing the case Jagtap had harmed the cause of the workers.

I told Deshpandesaheb that even though Jagtap had withdrawn his case, I would like to continue with mine. So I wrote an application on my behalf to the Industrial Court and

my case was put back on file. I could not go to Pune at the time of the hearing of the case for I had no money. The case was, therefore, heard and decided ex-parte in favour of the mill management.

I, however, did not lose courage. I was determined to secure justice for me and the workers. So I filed a case in the Labour Court again. I will not withdraw this case, come what may I thought. It has been dragging on for the last eight years. I am still waiting for the verdict.

I knew all along that sooner or later I would be removed from service. So I had bought a small plot of land for myself when I had received one and half thousand rupees as bonus. I bought tin-sheets in an auction and erected a small house with planks and bamboo lattice work. My wife now knew quite well how to manage a grocery shop. So in the front portion of the house, I started one.

In the meanwhile a daughter was born to us. The earnings from the grocery shop were sufficient to meet the expenses of the household. I purchased the goods for the shop and my wife sold them. Since the time I lost my job at the mill, my wife had shouldered the responsibilities of maintaining the household.

Then I set up a small 'hotel' in front of the Natraj Theatre. The hotel was in a small rickety hut. I had no previous experience of running a 'hotel'. It was a one-man business. I myself prepared the tea and went out with cups and saucers to supply it whenever I received an order.

The mill workers gathered in my hotel every day to keep abreast of the developments in the mill. There used to be discussions on the problems of the workers. Some of the workers often remarked: 'It is because of us that Gaikwad is compelled to do this work of cleaning cups and saucers and serving tea.'

One day while dicussions were going on as usual, some members of the supervisory staff had come to see a film. I received an order for tea. As I was on my way with a tea-kettle and cups, a supervisor from the mill saw me on the road. My clothes were dirty. Seeing me going he deliberately

called out to me, saying in a mocking tone, 'Well, what are you doing, Laxmanrao?'

I replied, 'Oh, nothing much. I've set up a hotel. I earn my living by honest work.'

I felt very sad. There was a time when I spoke to these people with influence and dignity. Now that I was thrown out of service, these very people jeered and laughed at me.

Then I would think to myself: 'How long am I going to run a hotel like this in a dingy hut?' I had, however, firmly made up my mind that I would weld the labour into a strong union, and one day take my seat with these people who had indulged in insulting me. But the insult that I felt that day hurt me to the quick as though a thorn had pierced the heart.

I could hardly earn 10-15 rupees after working from seven in the morning to eight at night. So I wound up the hotel business and once again set up a vegetable shop. Thus I began to manage both the grocery and the vegetable shop.

Bhagwanrao Deshpande called me to attend every meeting of the party. I constantly remained in contact with him for substantial help for my shop. Bhagwanrao Deshpande then arranged for a loan of Rs. 2,000 through a bank.

Thereby I could increase the working capital of my shop. I maintained my household out of the earnings from the shop for a considerable period.

Now, Father, my wife, my daughter (Sangita) and myself lived together. Household expenses kept on mounting. My in-laws lived with us for a time, when they came to Latur on their thieving business. When they earned well, they met our household expenses. Moreover, my brother-in-law, Kisan, gave me some money while departing. On such occasions I felt that they should continue to pay such visits so that it would help me to tide over over our monetary difficulties. I would often muse: 'Will I get a job in Bombay?' Then I would learn that some of the workers had left for Surat and think that I too should go there.

My elder brother—Sambha was working in a spinning mill at Aurangabad during this period. So leaving my wife and father at Latur I went to him. The saheb, however, came to

know that I was the leader of the strike at the spinning mill in Latur and he told me there was no vacancy in the mill.

My sister-in-law had started a dairy for people from Backward Communities. The dairy had been registered recently. She told me that she was the Chairperson of the Co-operative. My sister-in-law was illiterate, so she suggested that I work as the Secretary since I was educated and knew how to read and write. In return she offered me an equal share in the milk that the dairy got as its profit and over and above that, half whatever milk was left after the sale.

I decided to stay with her. Twenty-one members of the Dairy Co-operative were sanctioned loans to buy cows. My sister-in-law, the members and myself, along with a merchant, went to Dhule to purchase cows. It was understood between us that the cows were to be priced far higher in the bill than their actual price in a bid to realise more money from the bank.

The merchant, who had accompanied us, contracted to buy ten cows. We actually purchased fifteen cows. They were priced between Rs. 1200 and Rs. 1500 each. We, however, prepared a cash-memo showing the prices between Rs. 1900 and Rs. 2000 for each cow. We had thought that the purchase amount would be entrusted to the Chairperson.

The field officer of the bank, who had accompanied us, called me aside and suggested. 'Look, we should share the amount above the actual price equally.'

I said, 'We'll settle that later at Aurangabad.' He said, 'No, that won't do.'

Then my sister-in-law started bargaining with him. He demanded Rs. 300 to 700 for each cow purchased. My sister-in-law refused.

Then the merchant who had accompanied us suggested that the merchants should receive only the exact amount of the purchase price and that the remaining amount should be handed over to the Bank Manager or to us. I agreed to his proposal. The members who were with us were illiterate and did not understand anything of this deal. Since they were getting their cows they kept quiet.

The Bank Manager, however, paid all the amount to the merchants and we went to them along with our merchants to recover the surplus payment. But the merchants went back on their word and said, 'Give us at least Rs. 200 per cow as our share of the deal. Our demand is not very exhorbitant.'

There were negotiations and complaints and counter-complaints and the merchants paid us Rs. 2000 only. Our merchant claimed Rs. 500 as his commission.

My sister-in-law told me, 'You'll not get anything out of this amount.'

So I asked her, 'What will I get?' She said: 'The Society receives at least eight to nine litres of surplus milk and we make money by disposing it of every day.' I decided to wait and see what I got.

I began to receive milk from the members every day. I skimmed it with a machine and removed the cream. Then I purchased it for the Society. I made about Rs. 200 per week out of this. My sister-in-law forced me to share that amount too with her and asked me to wrangle some amount out of the earnings of members by falsifying accounts.

The members of the Society came to me every day and grumbled: 'Secretary-saheb, whatever money we're getting is not enough even for hay for the cows. How are we going to pay back the debts of the bank? I felt sorry for them even before they came to me with their tales of woes. The sister-in-law had unnecessarily indulged in overpricing the cows and overcharging the members. She charged two thousand rupees for a cow which was, in fact, bought for fourteen hundred rupees only. Moreover, she also indulged in underhand dealings in the sale of the milk. Here too she paid less than the members' due. I completely lost my head over this defrauding of the poor members and one day I violently quarrelled with my sister-in-law taking the side of the poor members. So my sister-in-law drove me away and I returned to Latur without any money after three months of work in Aurangabad.

I was away from my wife, daughter and father for a pretty long time. I yearned to meet them again. I returned home. My wife and father thought that since I was away from home for

quite some time, I must have returned with substantial savings. But, in fact, nothing of the sort had happened. On the contrary one more person was added to the already starving three.

I did not know how the shop and the household were run in my absence. By now the shop had ceased to be a worthwhile business. So I tried other avenues of business. I could not afford to invest any more money in the decrepit shop, so I started selling chilli powder on one of the roads. I used to buy chillis, ask my wife to grind them on a machine. I sold the chilli powder. Then I began to buy *bombil*[87], other kinds of fish, dried fish, soak them in water and get them fried from Bhoi-galli in the morning and sell them. I also sold salted groundnuts. I could earn about 10 to 15 rupees in this way.

The days passed somehow in this drudgery. But the mind toyed with the fanciful idea of doing something worth while for the poor, preferable starting organizations for their welfare. This idea constantly buzzed in my brain.

One N.N.B. Shaikh lived in front of my house. He was a teacher but had been retrenched. He was determined to start a school on his own. He did, after some efforts start a primary school in Urdu medium at Oushe. He was languishing in the same miserable condition as I was. he had only one set of clothes, which he washed every night and wore again the next day. He was now busy with his school.

I met him one day. He advised me: 'Gaikwad, lots of facilities are being made available to the people of your communities. Why don't you start an organization of sort as I've done?' I took his advice and started the *District Pathrut Samaj Sanghatana*[88] with his help. I approached some rich persons and got the letter-head pads printed in the name of the organization. Then I began meeting the right persons in the cause of the organization. I simultaneously kept the shop running. I spent many days travelling around with the idea of doing something for the people of my community. While travelling around I had to keep the shop closed. I used to take

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[87]*Bombil* : Bombay Duck

[88]*Samaj Sanghatana* : Community organization.

money from the shop for my travelling. This brought about the decline of the shop.

In this struggle with poverty, father fell ill. Father used to live with Bhagwan Anna for a fortnight or so, then he would come and live with me. He was used to good meals at the landlord's house where he had served for many years. So whatever we could give him in two meals a day was not enough to satisfy his hunger. Whenever I passed through particularly hard days, I told him to go and live with Anna.

Father very well understood that I told him to go only because of the acute scarcity of food at my house. In fact, I used to look after him as well as I could. So Baba always preferred to live with me. Whenever he went to live with Anna, my sister-in-law would treat him curtly and starve him with scanty and untimely meals. While she would serve her children, she would grumble: 'For how many days shall we maintain you, you lazy lout?' This harassment had broken him. My father was a tall man with a good bone-structure. Now he looked only a skeleton.

In the circumstances he fell ill and the sister-in-law refused to look after him. She grumbled all the while, so he came back to my home one day. I told my wife, 'Look, don't grumble and quarrel with Father as sister-in-law does.'

My wife did look after my father's needs for food. We could not spend money on doctors and medicines in his illness. We had little money to spare for doctors' fees and rickshaw. Sometimes we would take the money from the shop and pay the doctor's fees and buy medicines. Father was, however, in a bad way and was confined to bed. He could not move on his own. He had to relieve himself in bed. My wife cleaned the excreta and carried out his urine in a bowl every day. There was always an unpleasant odour in the small room.

My wife, however, did everything without grumbling. Father would often say: 'Laxman take me to the Civil Hospital.' I did not have even five rupees in my pocket in those days. Intense sorrow was the only feeling I was left with.

How was I to manage the big fee of a dispensary? I used to remain at the shop throughout the day till I could collect about 10 to 15 rupees and then I would go and bring medicine. If I went to the Civil Hospital, they would tell me that the doctor had left.

The monsoon arrived amidst all this. Once it started to rain, water would seep into the room from all the four sides. It would flow in through the cracks in the partition made of wooden planks. Even the floor would become clammy and cold. Father was seiously ill, so we spread a palm-leaf mat underneath him on the floor. We would shiver as we slept in our bare beds. We could hardly sleep in such uncomfortable conditions. Sangita was just a two-year-old baby. We had only two coverlets: one for father and the other for Sangita. My wife and myself slept covering ourselves with a single sari.

In such miserable conditions Baba's illness grew worse. There were no regular earnings. No one was willing to lend money as I was unemployed. I had no credit even with the people who claimed to be my friends and acquaintances. Father would groan all night crying, 'God, please take me away soon.'

He required meals, even though he was ill. We could prepare only *dal* and *bhakar* of hybrid *jowar*. Father would turn his face away from us and eat very little food. Sometimes he would take a couple of biscuits from the shop. At last even this food had become scarce and regular meals were stopped.

While we were in this miserable state, whenever my relatives came to my house on one of their thieving missions, I used to feel I should join them, earn some money and take father to a good dispensary. The fear of torture by the police, however, deterred me. One mind would urge me to go while the other would pull me back in apprehension.

Then on one rainy night it was drizzling and we had dozed off. Since Father had stopped taking food, my wife used to get up three-four times and give him some water to drink. But that night even my wife slept soundly and did not get up as usual. She got up early in the morning at three o'clock. She went out to the bathroom and on her way back called out to

my Father: Maamaa!

A shop almirah served as a partition between my father and the rest of us. Whenever my wife called him: 'Maamaa', he would answer in response. But there was no response on that day. My wife, fearing the worst, immediately burst into tears, wailing: 'Mama is gone! get up,' As she began to cry coudly I got up in a hurry and went behind the almirah and looked. Baba was lying with his eyes open, covered with only a torn *chaddar* in the biting cold.

All the neighbours around us were sleeping. My wife wailed in a high-pitched voice. Both of us were terribly afraid. For we had heard that a corpse sprang up and stood on its feet, if the dead man's last desires remained unfulfilled. On hearing us cry the neighbours — Vedpatak, Jadebai, Musalman Amma — came in.

A small kerosene lantern threw a very dim light around. Father's body was cold to the touch. I poured a little milk into his mouth. Musalman Amma said 'Laxman, his legs have stretched out, fold them up a little.'

I tried to fold his legs, but they would not fold. The others, who had gathered round would not touch the dead body with superstitious dread. Father had become stiff and rigid. We did not know when he had died in the night. Then Uddhav Sonar, Potdar, my wife and I folded his legs somehow with great efforts. We took the kerosene lantern near father's face and saw that his eyes were covered with ants. I brushed away the ants with my hand and closed his eyes. I had never seen a person dying at home. Hence the haunting fear.

I began to cry loudly. All the people from the lane gathered at our place. Some tried to console me. 'Don't cry, Laxman, are you going to wake up your father with these cries!'

Poverty took away my mother. She died a miserably poor woman. Harchanda was missing. Father was the only sustaining link with the rest of the family. Now, that too, was snapped. He could have lived some more years. But poverty deprived him of medical aid. Starvation killed him. This thought made me very sad.

I sent a boy from the mill to Anna early in the morning to

tell him of father's death. Dada, Anna and their wives came crying, beating their chests. We, brothers, embraced one another, clasped one another round the neck in sorrow and cried.

Anna wailed: 'Now we're helpless without the protective unmbrella of our father!'

We spent that dark early morning in wailing. There was a Marwadi woman whom I regarded as my sister. I went to her house and told her that my father was dead and that I had no money for the cremation of his dead body. She helped me with one hundred fifty rupees in that dire situation.

Sambha-Bhau was away at Aurangabad. Anna and Dada had children to look after and were very poor. They had no money. I gave Dada the hundred and fifty rupees I had borrowed and sent him to the cremation. Dada bought firewood. Father's body had become rigid and ants had gathered in clusters on it. Our hut had been erected on bare ground, so there was no dearth of ants.

Messages were sent to our relatives in Bhadgaon, Salgara, Kavatha, Dhanegaon, Sonvati, Jawali and they came in threes and fours by the afternoon. The brother at Aurangabad could not arrive in time. We had sent him a telegram.

When all the relatives had gathered, a bamboo-and-cloth stretcher was prepared on which father was to be carried for cremation. Then Baba was given his last ritualistic bath and was carried to the Marwado Cemetery to the accompaniment of a drum. There Baba's body was placed on the pile of firewood and cremated.

Dada's and Anna's in-laws offered liquor and rice to assuage the sorrow of the death. The in-laws made Dada and Anna drink. Though I refused with all vehemence I was forced to drink with the admonition: 'Drink you must to assuage the sorrow of death.' I took a couple of sips as a matter of ritual.

After the drinks Dada, Anna and I began to weep in sorrow in a ritualistic performance. Dada was dead drunk and wept, falling on the necks of his relatives and in-laws.

After the departure of the relatives, the neighbours began

to remark, seeing us drinking on the very day father had died: 'What sort of people are these! The father is deed and they drink liquor!' The neighbours offered us food that day.

Within five days of my father's death, we performed the ritual offerings to deliver father's soul from earthly bondage. On that day we — Dada, Anna and I—managed somehow to obtain a little lamb. We cooked it and carried it to the cemetery along with the things that Father was known to be fond of. Baba liked to smoke bidi, he liked to eat *jeelebi*, *shev* and *bhaji*[89] in a hotel. We carried all these things and placed them on the spot where father was cremated. We bowed in obeisance before the offerings. A crow touched the offerings, signigying that Father had no more earthly desires left and his soul was finally delivered. Then we returned.

On that day also everybody drank liquor. Sambha-bhau had arrived from Aurangabad and was present. All the relatives and in-laws gathered once more. Father left us for his heavenly abode.

Memories of Baba kept popping up in my mind off and on, and I felt sad. Even now we had to starve for days. The fear of uncertainty always lurked in my mind and the thought of what was going to happen to us haunted me. We barely survived by selling biscuits, lemon-drops, and such confectionery. Our earnings were hardly four rupees a day. Now we were three in the family: My wife, Sangita and myself. I could not afford to give even a cup of milk to my only daughter. And election to the Lok Sabha arrived as godsend opportunity. Manikrao Sonavane was contesting from the Latur constituency.

I campaigned for him. I went about shouting: 'Wreck a Masjid, wreck a temple, but do not break the heart of Manikrao Sonawane.' The election campaign was inaugurated by breaking a coconut. Many speakers spoke on that day. I too made a forceful speech like the ones I used to make before the crowd of workers and appealed to the voters to vote for Manikrao Sonavane to ensure the welfare of the poor.

Sonavane was contesting the election on the ticket of the

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[89]*Shev* and *bhaji* : Deep fried savouries.

Congress (I), while Shivraj Patil Chakurkar was contesting on the Congress (S) ticket. I rode on anybody's motor-bike in the election. Sometimes I campaigned in villages, travelling in a jeep. I made speeches exhorting the voters to vote for Congress (I).

We were given lunch coupons for everday meals. The lunches were sumptuous. How I wished that the elections continued indefinitely and the poor people continued to receive some money in this way!

Seeing that I was conducting a very good campaign for his father, Manikrao Sonavane's eldest son, used to give me Rs.100-150 periodically. I used that money to stock the shop. The election, in a way, reduced the pinch of poverty and we could eat meals occasionally at home. I used to sit in a rickshaw and canvass on a mike going through all the lanes and bylanes of Latur.

The campaign gave me an opportunity to get acquainted with several political bigwigs. An acquaintance thus made of G.S. Patil, Sonavane's son-in-law, landed me a job as a peon in the Latur Municipality. Though my real interest lay in social work in my community, poverty forced me to accept that job of a peon. I worked in N.P. No. 12 School (Nagarpalika No. 12). I went to the school every day. I swept the premises, even cleaned the shit lying anywhere in the school premises. A brahmin woman was the teacher. She had told me to wash the tiles with water every week.

If anybody asked me what job I did in the Municipality I used to tell them I taught the pupils of the Primary Class, because I did infact teach till the lady teacher's arrival. Then I got fed up with the sweeping and cleaning. The lady teacher compained that I disobeyed her orders. So I applied and got myself transferred to the Municipal Octroi Post.

I was as yet temporary. I used to get Rs. 12 for every day I worked. Being a peon at the Octroi Post fetched me a considerable income by way of 'rewards.' The Octroi clerk made Rs. 40-50 every day. Goods were undervalued by noting down a quantity less than the actual. Many trucks filled with sand and stones passed the Octroi Post but only one receipt

was made for all of them and considerable money was pocketed in such underhand deals. I received as my reward Rs. 10 to 15 everyday besides my daily wages.

Even highly placed officers in the Municipality stoop to fraud and underhand dealings. I often thought of how people of my community who stole only for their two daily meals, were punished as thieves. These big officers defraud their organizations and institutions in broad daylight; yet no one says a word against them. I began to become conscious of such anomalies.

Sometimes I would be on duty at the Barsi Octroi Post or the Ausa Octroi Post. The Octroi clerk would sleep when on a night shift. I used to remain awake throughout the night. Early at dawn tempos and trucks would pass by the Octroi Post. I used to signal them to stop with a battery in my hand. I was still a novice at that job, but when I approached the tempos or trucks, they would give me Rs. 25 to 30 and telling me not to wake up the Octroi clerk, drive away. I used to pocket such amounts. Hence there was quite a spurt in my income.

Though I was a peon at the Octroi, I enjoyed a kind of prestige there. Both Octroi clerks and peons could go to sleep while on duty. I was not required to do such menial tasks as sweeping and serving water to bosses. Some months passed happily in this way.

But I was transferred to work in the Octroi Officer's office for a month. I had to run whenever he rang for me and had to fetch tea and cigarettes whenever ordered. I had to take in water and tea for visitors. The change of duty brought with it a change of attitude in others towards me. I found doing all this, undignified and servile. The officer would shout at me: 'Go, bring water immediately. Do you want to retain your job or to go home?' I was disgusted with such treatment. I felt that if I continued in this fashion, I would be able to achieve nothing in life.

I also believed that if I was destined to achieve great heights, they would be attained somehow. This service was

not giving me a dignified life, it was reducing me to abject slavery. I thought that political bigwigs offered us such jobs to ensure that we did not rise in life and pose a threat to them.

So I met Comrade Bhagwanrao Deshpande and told him all that was in my mind. He told me that he would secure for me a loan for a cycle shop. I threw up my job instantly and sat at home, unemployed again. My wife did not like it. She thought that when I had a job in hand and it was fetching me a good income, there was no reason why I should throw the means of obtaining my daily meals. How could she understand what was suffocating me? The yawning gap between the poor and the rich tormented my mind; vermin were eating into my brains.

Once I had gone to Kawatha. I met Prof. B.L. Gaikwad and my brother-in-law, D.S. Gaikwad, there. We had a discussion on the dire necessity of bringing together the people of our community into an organization and sending our children to schools instead of teaching them to pick pockets and steal. So we convened a meeting of the interested persons from our community and decided to organize a gathering of all the people of our community. We organized the first gathering of the Nomadic and Denotified Tribes in 1978. Shri Padmasinh Patil was then the Minister for Social Welfare. We invited him as the Chief Guest to this gathering.

I did not know the procedure for obtaining the permission to run boardings and schools for children. I came to know that the Minister for Social Welfare had sanctioned permission for a residential hostel, so on the same day I started a hostel with arrangements for lodging and boarding at Kawatha and got it inaugurated at the hands of the Chief Guest. I spoke of the misery and the agony of our community in my speech.

There were some prestigious relatives of the Minister. They spoke to the Minister about me. The Minister in his address referred to me and said: 'Today a friend of mine had a boarding inaugurated but he did not know that the organization needed to be registered first. Only then could permission be granted for the boarding.' As I heard this I became conscious of my backwardness and immaturity. If I am so ignorant, I

thought, what must be the condition of the entire community. Then I went to Shaikh Guruji and asked him the procedure for the registration of an organization. He prepared the Constitution for me. I got other necessary papers prepared by Prof. B.L. Gaikwad and sent the papers to Aurangabad for registration.

This going about for community affairs once again brought back hard days for the family. Now I was obsessed with the idea of starting a residential school. But how? My wife's brother living in Kawatha was a versatile thief. He was a good-natured person. I made him the Chairman of the Organization. He collected some funds for the Organization. All that money was however, spent in travelling. I then offered my residential house for sale. A peon working in a bank offered to buy it. I had at least a residential shelter. But I sold it for six thousand rupees.

I hired a residence-cum-shop accommodation from the Marwadi woman with whom I had a close, cordial relationship and who was like a dear sister. Now I had a substantial sum in hand. I opened a bigger shop, stocking more things, and bought a plot of land for two thousand rupees. The rest of the money I invested in the shop. Since my wife could manage the shop by herself I was free to travel. I only looked after the stocking of the shop. I busied myself with the task of registration of the Organization.

I began to come in close contact with more and more people of Kawatha. All the people in Kawatha right from aged elders to young boys were actively engaged in the business of picking and stealing. Kawatha is in district Usmanabad. Half of its population is from our Uchalya community. I was obsessed with the idea of improving the lot of these people and making them change to respectable ways of living. I thought if the children of these people could be sent to school, the next generation of our community would come into the respectable mainstream of society.

The people of this place have been reduced to such abject poverty that as soon as a boy completes his fourth standard in school or becomes 10-11 years old, he is trained in the art and

craft of the stealing profession. Having observed the miserable condition of these people and taking into account the population of our community in Kawatha, I decided to start a *Balwadi*[90] and hostel there.

The Marathas in this town exploit the ignorance and poverty of our people and treat them inhumanly. They give loans to our people, charging a rate of interest of ten per cent for eight days. Whatever the people bring back from thieving trips (bundles of cloth and gold) is adjusted against the interest only, the principal amount remaining ever untouched. The police Patil of the town levies a monthly tax on every pickpocket and unscrupulously recovers it from him. Every time people return from thefts, they have to pay a *hafta*[91] of up to 50 rupees to the police. If ever a purse containing a large amount such as Rs. 5000 - 10,000 has been picked by anybody, the police trace him to Kawatha and once it is confirmed that the purse has been picked by someone in Kawatha, the police Patil calls everybody from our community to his house for questioning: 'Tell me which one of your gang has picked the purse, otherwise I'll look everybody in, and ask the Sub-inspector to punish everyone of you.'

There are warring factions among the thieves in Kawatha. They are on inimical terms. So someone discloses the name of the person who has picked the purse. Then the police Patil calls the culprit to his house and asks the police to thrash and torture him till he admits his guilt. On admission of the guilt, the culprit has to part with half his earnings to the police Patil and the police. The police Patil then suppresses the case. Hence the pick-pockets never fail to give giving the police-Patil a part of their earnings.

The people of our community visit crowded fairs, festivals and markets all over Maharashtra. If an entire gang gets apprehended at any time, the members of their families face hard days and they often go without food. On such occasions the police Patil pleads with the rich people in the town to get the arrested people released.

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[90]*Balwadi:* Children's nursery school.

[91]*Hafta:* Instalment

Sometimes tin sheets from the roofs of the huts are pawned and money raised to get the culprits released from police custody. There are lawyers who have built their houses and feathered their own nests on the money extorted from the people of our community. I know at least one lawyer in Aurangabad, who personally visits the places wherever our people are arrested and secures their release but extorts exhorbitant amounts from them in the bargain.

Police inspectors-in-charge of the areas where the people of our communities reside in large numbers have filled their coffers and had fattened on the spoils received from the community. They stick close to political leaders to ensure that they do not get transferred from these places. Our people live in Kawatha, Salgara, Bhadgaon and live on picking and stealing. The money brought from outside goes into the pockets of the people of these places. And the rich people of these places latch on to our people. The money-lenders, the proprietors of gambling dens, and the liquor vendors of these places have built their fortunes by exploiting our community.

The people of other communities, who reside in Kawatha at present, were once extremely poor, so much so that they could hardly find a satisfying meal every day. They are rolling in money today thanks to our community. These people extort money from the people of our community on one pretext or the other, and wallow in comfort and luxury. There are people in this place who have become rich farmers on our money. Some of them own more than two three trucks, have built spacious buildings for themselves and improved their farming.

In this town reside the most versatile pickpockets who are widely well known for their skills. Even a boy of sixteen earns more than 5000 rupees on a single picking trip. One gang consists of four to five pickpockets and a few others who wash clothes and cook food. One such gang roams about for more than a couple of months and brings back not less than 25,000 to 30,000 rupees. The expenditure of travelling around, lodging, boarding, drinking and clothing to anything from 10,000 to 15,000 rupees.

As soon as these gangsters come back to their homes, money-lenders pay them visits. Everyone of them pays 4 to 5 hundred rupees by way of interest to the money-lenders and again borrows money from them even while he has some money left out of his earnings. The poor gangsters hardly ever live a happy comfortable life even for a fortnight, in spite of such heavy earnings. They are always in debt and ever-starving. I see with my own eyes people enjoying themselves on the incomes of these poor ignorant people of Kawatha, Salgara, Jawali and Bhagdaon.

If a father of a household in Kawatha, Salgara Bhadgaon is apprehended and put behind bars for a couple of months, all the old and the young ones in the house starve and the mother herself sends her nine—or ten-year-old young son or daughter to another gang to be trained in the art and craft of thieving. The gang trains the young one into a competent thief. The expectation is that if the father ever gets arrested, the son or the daughter will run the household in his absence. If a son gets arrested, the father remains back to run the family life. Some pickpockets from Salagara and Kawatha have improved their lot. They have purchased farms and taken to farming, leaving off picking for good.

Himmatlal, a distant cousin of mine, lives in Chamegaon. He was a top-class pickpocket and extremely agile in his movements. Whenever I sit chatting with Vishnu, Khandu, Rampor, they tell me that Himmatlal can pick two pockets at one and the same time using his two hands. If challenged on a bet, he would pick the pocket even of a Sub-Inspector. Kaiser used to tell me that the lad was extremely agile, he could steal a purse from a stranger wherever it might happen to be on his person. He had never been caught by the police.

One day his gang had gone for a walk at night, and they picked a man's pocket. It was a wad of brand new 100-rupee notes. They thought that it was a diary. They just rifled through the wad of currency notes as though it were a diary and finding nothing they threw the wad into a dilapidated well. Some of the notes came loose and lay scattered in the well. While returning in the morning by the same way they

saw a crowd of people gathered round the well. They went there to see what the matter was, they saw 100-rupee currency notes lying in the well. Now they could do nothing. They beat their heads and pulled their hair in frustration, wailing over their foolishness in throwing away while in a drunken state a bundle of currency notes thinking that it was a diary.

My wife's cousin sister Changuna, also hails from Kawatha. She lived in Solapur. She visited Kawatha off and on. She maintained a household of eight members. She had three husbands. In one trip she would bring back necklaces, lockets, pendants, Mangalsutras weighing several *tolas*. No one ever dared to apprehend her for she dressed superbly and moved around bedecked in gold ornaments of three four *tolas*. Nobody even thought that such a woman would ever stoop to stealing. Hence nobody ever suspected her. If a man or a woman ever attempted to catch her, she would beat him or her saying, 'You think I'm a thief, eh! I've servants like you in my employment.' She would drink three-four litres of toddy every day and eat half a kilo of meat. If ever she came to meet my wife she would need eight-nine cups of tea, twenty-twenty-five pieces of bread. There was, however, one good thing about her. Wherever she went she spent her own money. She had been quite slim in her youth.

Changuna's sister regularly visited the shrine of Kawathi Devi on days of sacred pilgrimages. She was so versatile that she picked pockets of grown-up men and lifted lockets and necklaces of women from their necks. She then kept a Sikh with her and left off thieving.

Then Changuna started her business. She grew very fat almost obese in the course of time. There were always four-five maidservants around her in her service. She herself performed no household work. There were persons to bathe her, to wash her clothes, to look after her children and to cook meals. Many people of our community vied with each other to enter her gang. She was very famous in our community. She could snap the chains of lockets and Mangalsutras with her hands. She had lent money to my father-in-law for my marriage.

She worshipped regularly the Goddess-mother of Tuljapur. She had earned substantially on one occasion. So she had arranged a *Gondhal*[92]. A goat was sacrificed as an offering to the Goddess and a community meal was arranged. She had drunk four-five jars of toddy that day. The singers were dancing and singing. She went into a trance and began to dance. She fell down in a fit suddenly. Her eyes rolled upwards showing only the white and she died. She was not even thirty then. I had attended her cremation. Many people from Solapur had attended her cremation.

The goldsmith, who had purchased kilos of gold from her, was also present. He has built a three-storey building on the business Changuna gave him. On hearing of her death he had bought a *Paithani*[93] worth Rs. 500 from Solapur to put on her at her cremation. He wailed loudly, 'Chingu, you shouldn't have died so early. Oh God, why had this to happen!' He was beating his breast, while he wept. He had been very poor. It was Chingu who had made him rich. If she gave him ten *tolas* of gold, the goldsmith would tell her that it was only eight *tolas*. Moreover he would buy from her for at a throw-away price, the things being stolen property, and sell at a much higher price later.

He erected a three-storey building for himself. Chingu, however, died leaving her children naked and destitute. They were left without any means of livelihood for them. The poor children are suffering now. The goldsmith could buy a 500-rupee worth Paithani for the dead Chingu. No beneficiary of hers is, however, willing to show his gratitude by providing for her children. They are starving.

In a short while they will grow and start the thieving business like Chingu. Some people from our own community will teach them the tricks of picking and stealing and on becoming thieves they will be exploited by goldsmiths, moneylenders and the police. One Chingu, who made all others rich and maintained her children by thieving, is dead

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[92]*Gondhal:* A religious chorus in the name of the Goddess. It is a folk song like a ballad.

[93]*Paithani:* A high-quality sari generally worn on special occasions.

but in my society there are innumerable such Chingus.

I am not as miserables as these thieves, for, in my childhood, some good habits were inculcated in me. I, however, feel frustrated and angry, when I witness the wretched situation around me.

There is one Ithi of the same age as Chingu. She is also a relative just as Chingu was. She too has had more than one husband. One of them was from our community. Now she has married a Muslim. Both she and her husband are in this branded business. They live among the people of our community.

Once they had gone on their usual business. They could not pick, steal or pilfer anything. They somehow managed to come to Pune from Alandi without tickets. They had no money to go any further or to eat something, and were in great trouble. At last Ithi sold her pretty little daughter of hardly one and half years, whom she had borne in her womb for nine months and given birth to in pain, for 200 rupees in Pune. She kept her four years old son with her and sold her daughter, for the son will be an asset later on, he will steal and maintain the two. This is not a very old story. In fact, the particular incident I have narrated above, had come to pass just a few days before Chingu's death. Itha is still living.

This has often set me thinking. It is a pity that even after thirty-nine years of Independence, people are forced to sell their offspring to feed themselves. If living with dignity and self-respect is impossible, what is the use of this freedom? This must not be so. Hence the need to do something in this direction. Whenever I move through the people of my community and hear such tales of woe, I become restless, my brain swims with giddying thoughts.

Looking at this picture of the entire community, I set myself the task of starting an educational institution sponsored by the Pathrut Samaj Organization. I managed to secure the registration of the Nomadic, Denotified Tribes' Educational Institution at Kawatha in 1979 after much effort in various directions. I felt that at least the young ones of our community could be set on the road to improvement. Then I

applied to the Social Welfare Department for a sanction to start a hostel at Usmanabad.

I was utterly ignorant of the ways and procedures of the Education Department. I thought as soon as the Organization was registered, I would get the permission to start a hostel. Padmasinh Patil had promised to grant the necessary permission.

I was bored with repeated visits to the concerned officers at Usmanabad. Once they told me that I would be given permission on receipt of the requisite quota for hostels in March. But March passed without any action. I had lost everything. Whatever money I had collected from our shop had been, by then, spent. The shop also ran into loss on account of my frequent travelling away from home.

The organization was at Kawatha, so the letters from the Social Welfare Department were received at the Kawatha address. The people of our community were illiterate and ignorant. Every time I received a letter, they thought that Laxman Gaikwad had been directed to receive money from the Government. So, they began to suspect my bonafides and accuse me openly of pocketing money from the Government in their name. I tried to explain to my in-laws that their suspicion was not true. I told them that we had not yet received the approval of the concerned department. Without the approval we could not receive the financial grant. But people misunderstood me and began to abuse me. I often felt very sad but was quite helpless before the rock-like obstinacy of the community.

One of my friends told me there was no substance in my attempts to obtain a hostel for the boys of my community. 'How can people like you get a hostel? It's a regular thieves' market. Only they who are willing to pay thousand — two thousand rupees to the concerned officers, get permissions to start hostels and nurseries.'

That explanation threw a flood of light in my stupid head. A poor person like me without means to pay his way had no place in the educational field. On the one hand my own community was openly cursing me and raising a scandal by

accusing me of pocketing their money; on the other, I could not obtain an approval and sanction without greasing the palms of the officers.

The Chairman, the Vice-Chairman and the Members of the organization were illiterate and uneducated. All of them were pickpockets and thieves. Where was I to bring educated people from? There were a couple of persons in Kawatha who were educated; but they were Government employees. So on account of this experience and the deteriorating condition of my own family, I was forced to give up my ambition of starting an education institution for my people.

I returned to my home. Besides Advocate Bhagwanrao Deshpande, there was no other person close to me, sympathising with me. I requested him, 'Saheb, please get me a loan for a cycle shop.' The Advocate got me a dozen cycles through a bank and I started Vimukta Cycle Mart on the Barsi Naka in Latur. The shop proved to be a satisfactory venture, with a turn-over of about eighty rupees a day. I myself did all the work including mending punctures and pumping air into tyres. I also undertook repairs and maintenance of cycles owned by others. That too fetched some money. I employed a servant. I paid the loan-instalments of the bank regularly. Now I began to enjoy some leisure. I attended the programmes of all and sundry party organizations and always requested that I might be allowed to make a speech. Thus, I spoke at the conventions of practically all parties. I got acquainted with several party workers. Often I used to join the *morchas*[94] of different parties along with Pradip Patil and Prakash Reddy, two of my many recent acquaintances. At such times I used to leave the shop in the care of the servant. Prakash Reddy, a radical communist ideologist, worked in my shop and I was well acquainted with him.

Inamdar, a Muslim, was the President of the ITI College Union. We had discussions about political movements and agitations every day. I was being influenced by the Communist

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[94]*Morchas:* Protest rallies.

ideology gradually and my thoughts dwelt on the Communist movement. Advocate Deshpande regularly gave me Communist manifestos, publications and bulletins to read. He enrolled me as a member of the Communist Party of India.

I put the entire responsibility of the shop on my servant and busied myself in organizing unions in slum localities and in the spinning mill. This was the advice given to me by Advocate Deshpande. I too was quite happy with this arrangement.

I would often ask my friend to manage the cycle shop and I would visit slum localities to organize their unions. I began to visit people at night and urge them to start unions. I often gave speeches and, impressed by these, people were inspired to start unions.

Mill workers received bonus at Diwali. Workers of the spinning mill began to approach Advocate Deshpande and me at the time of Diwali festival. They requested us: 'Please organize and start a union of mill workers. We're receiving less and less bonus, the workers are being harassed.'

As it was, I was still angry with the Chairman and the Manager for removing me from my job wrongfully. So I issued a bulletin protesting against the injustice to me and harrassment of one of the workers and distributed it among the workers at the gate of the mill while the workers were coming out of the mill after their shifts. The bulletin caused a commotion among the workers. The Management sensed that the workers were in a mood to get united again. The bulletin had only my name on it as its publisher.

The Chairman had taken some workers into confidence and had destroyed the previous strike with their help. These workers were traitors to the cause of the labour. These workers indulged in all sorts of goondaism at the bidding of Chairman. Ramakant, Mudhe and some other workers of this gang met me one day as I was walking towards my shop wheeling a cycle. It was quite early in the morning. They said to me, 'Gaikwad, we too want to join your Union. We are due to get a rise in our bonus. We'll not do this time what we did last time. Let's discuss this at length.'

So saying they took me to the railway line. And Ramakant Pidha suddenly hit me in the stomach. Then they began to kick, fist and lash me with a cycle chain. I began to shout.

Ramling Jagtap was passing by on a motorcycle at that time. He came running to my help. All of them disappeared when they saw him. Blood was trickling out of my mouth and I was badly bruised all over. Jagtap took me to the police station on his motorcycle. The police registered my complaint. But none of the goondas was arrested. They did not arrest the attackers even after my advocate asked them to do so. I think that the police are the guardians of the moneyed class. I will never get justice at their hands. The police never help or stand by the poor. I had this experience on several previous occasions.

Now I was thoroughly provoked. I determined that I would actively take part in political activities and organize several unions. I stopped going to my cycley shop. Some friends would look after it. I accepted whatever money my friends or the servant offered.

During this period Pradip Patil, Inamdar and I noted that the merchants from Latur were cheating rural farmers. They were selling a bag of hybrid seeds for Rs. 45 each at sowing time while its fixed lawful price was Rs. 22 only. We decided that we must do something for these farmers.

One day Pradip and I went to the market and sent one of our friends to one of the merchants with the instruction that he should buy a bag of hybrid seeds from him. As the merchant sold a bag to our friend for Rs. 45, he signalled with his hand. We ran to him, grabbed the seed-merchant and called all the farmers who were waiting in a queue to purchase seeds. We told the farmers that seed-bags were available with that merchant.

Over one and half thousand farmers gathered. We commanded the merchant to show us the godown in which the seed-bags were stocked. The merchant tried to hoodwink and stall us by leading us round and round the circular market-place instead of the godown. By then more than four thousand farmers had gathered round. The bags were found at

last in a certain place. We distributed all the bags among the farmers. All the farmers were furious with the merchant.

We decided to teach a lesson to these blackmarketeers. A farmer brought a donkey. Pradip and I forced the merchant to sit on it. We blackened his face by applying *kaat*, which we had obtained from a nearby *paan* shop. We put a cycle-tyre round his neck and hybrid seed-bags on his head. Then we took him in a procession through the market-place right up to the Hanuman Chowk.

All around us was a jostling crowd of four-five thousand people. As the news spread, two police constables arrived on the spot. But they simply kept on watching meekly. Other merchants called the Circle Inspector. Bawathankar, the Circle Inspector came in a jeep and pushing through the crowd arrested the merchant, Pradip Patil, Inamdar and me and took us to the police station. Bawathankar abused us and said, 'You take the law in your hands when I'm here, all the police force is here; you've dared blacken the face of a merchant and lead him through streets. In fact, you've blackened the face of and maligned the entire police force.'

Then he pushed me and Pradip against each other and beat us and registered a case against us. This incident was reported in the newspapers all over Maharashtra mentioning our names. The case against us dragged on for a pretty long time. Finally, the merchant withdrew the case in exasperation.

Since that incident all the mechants were afraid of Pradip Patil and me. They began to sell seeds at authorised rates. We began to organize unions in slum areas. I held meetings in all the slum areas in Latur and decided to march in a big procession to present our demands to the Deputy Collector of the District. I submitted the charter demanding that slum areas be converted into permanent residential areas for the slum-dwellers and electricity and water facilities be provided.

The police were well prepared for the 'Morcha' of the inhabitants of the slum areas. I had arranged such a march on my own for the first time.

Some of the workers did not like the initiative taken by me on my own. So on the previous night the Congress (I)

workers went round the hutments and told the inhabitants not to join 'Gaikwad's Morcha', otherwise they would stop the assistance being given under the Sanjay Self-Employment scheme and destroy the huts. As a result all those who had promised to join the Morcha, kept away from it. I had taken money from the shop, hired a rickshaw and mike and had advertised the hutments' Morcha to the Dy Collector's office. But only ten/twelve persons joined the Morcha. I had informed the police that more than a thousand people would march to the office. Finally there was no Morcha.

I rang the police station and informed them that the Morcha had been cancelled. The Dy Superintendent of Police shouted at me, 'who is going to pay the expenses incurred on the police bandobast? Why did you announce the Morcha? Report to the police station immediately.'

I was awfully frightened. I knew nothing about the procedure and rules about such an activity. I was terrified at the thought that I might have to really pay the police expenses. I began to visualize my arrest and confinement in the police lock-up. I went to shop directly and took some money for travelling expenses. I told my friend Jatal to look after the shop. I did not show that I was going away in fear of the police, but stayed at my in-law's place in Kawatha for three-four days.

I returned to Latur. The police did not ask me anything. I asked my friend Jatal, who was better informed than I was in such matters. He told me. 'No, the police do not make you pay in such cases.'

I was now fired with the idea of doing something for the people of my community. I began to visit places in Marathwada to rouse them against the injustice inflicted on the Nomadic and Denotified Tribes. Sometimes I took lawful steps and sometimes I arranged Morchas to bring pressure on the concerned officers to remove the injustice.

Within our community there are various castes and sub-castes. One Varma Bandgar had returned from a pilgrimage to Balaji. The Wada Samaj had arranged a function in his honour at Lamjana. Many people of this community from Andhra

and Karnataka had come to this function. I too was invited to attend.

I saw a form of worship of Balaji here that was quite different from that of the other Hindus. Varma Bandgar had gone on a pilgrimage to Balaji and the belief was that when he returned it was Balaji himself who came back in the person of Varma. So Varma was placed apart in a house and nobody was allowed to touch him till the function was over.

The function started and all the people of the Wadar Caste began to sing a Telugu song. They danced to the beat of Tumdya. Tumdyas are made of iguana-skin. The food for the offering is prepared in the house. After the offering was taken to him, Varma Bandgar was bathed. He was taken outside the town in wet clothes to the accompaniment of musical instruments.

I was watching the function very attentively. All the participants sat on a road outside the town. Varma was given the holy offering to eat on a piece of wet cloth. One more offering was placed on the road followed by an invocation in Telugu in a loud voice: 'Oh God Balaji, now your may return to your place. Now do not worry about us.' While they were shouting thus, Varma went into a trance, and when he came out of it, all the people returned to their homes.

I asked one of the Satwa, 'Why did you do this?' He told me, 'Saheb, Varma brought Balaji with him. Now Balaji must be sent back. If he is not sent back, he will not enter our houses on his own. When we send him back with these rites, he is pleased and goes back to his home.' Such was the different form of worship I had an opportunity to witness.

Now the movement for the improvement and welfare of the Nomadic and Denotified Tribes had taken strong roots and was gathering strength. There were social workers of our community in every Taluka. They readily visited places where they were invited to look into the injustice inflicted on the people of our community.

Once the people of our Uchalya community living at Kawatha were assaulted. The influential people of higher castes had unitedly attacked our community for the reason

that they had refused to pay exorbitant contributions for the Mahadeo Fair that year.

Every year the people of Kawatha compulsorily extort money from the people of our community for the Mahadeo Fair. People of the Uchalya community have always lived in mortal fear of the Patil and the Sarpanch of the place. If any one of them happens to be on the road, our people run away and go by another route. These influential people have struck terror in the hearts of our people and have wielded ruthless power for years. Those who are actively engaged in pickpocketing and stealing business have to pay as much as Rs. 251.

As the Mahadeo Fair approaches near, our people go out on thieving trips, collect large amounts and pay the Mahadeo Fair Tax before meeting even the daily expeness of the household or spending money on their own children.

And these influential people, to flaunt the name and prestige of Kawatha arrange wrestling contests, with the money extracted from us. Well-known wrestlers from distant places take part in these contests and crowds gather to witness.

But now our people have founded a community organization at Kawatha. I have arranged meetings, speeches on several occasions. As a result of these efforts now there is some sort of unity. The rich people of this place squeeze life out of our people. They lend money at high rates of interest. If a debtor fails to return the loan, he is caught, tied and kept under unlawful restraint in the house.

Once a shopkeeper grabbed my brother-in-law, beat him severely and locked him up in his shop. He was not released till money was paid. In fact, our people in Kawatha live a slave's life. Where can they go to seek justice? If they go to the police with the compaint of the beatings and harassments, the police arrest and lock them up in prison. Hence the meek and silent surrender to these harassments.

Being united and backed by the organaization, some of our people refused to pay the Fair Tax that year when the Patil, the Sarpanch and other bigwigs approached them. Some did

pay in fear. There were some ten to twelve people — Shiva Jadhav, Vishnu Gaikwad, Khandu Kamal were among them-—who told the Patil and the Sarpanch that though they indulged in picking and stealing, they did not work in that place, so they would not pay any contribution. They further said, 'Patil, if there is any function in Kawatha, you take money only from us. This time we won't pay the usual exorbitant amounts. We'll pay only Rs. 11 each.'

The Patil, the Sarpanch and the other Marathas were furious to hear the Pathruts — professional theieves — arguing and talking back to them. Then Sarpanch and the Patil boiled with anger and their faces went red with fury.

Some vagabonds from the village came brandishing sticks and axes. These vagabonds attacked our people ferociously, muttering: 'These Uchalya people have gone berserk and they dare argue with the Patil. Let's teach them a lesson.' Shiva Jadhav and Vishnu were severely wounded. The police did not intervene, though they came to know of the attack.

These people, who were severely beaten, directly approached me at Latur. They gave me a full report of the incident. I immediately met Mr. Rasal and Mr. Gonjme, the editors of *Daily Godatir Samachar* and apprised them of the situation at Kawatha. I had taken with me the persons who had been beaten so that they could see for themselves the truth.

Mr. Rasal of *Godatir Samachar* exposed and brought to light this heinous deed. He inserted a news item under the block heading: VAGABONDS ATTACK PATHRUT COMMUNITY AT KAWATHA. The news angered the vagabonds still more and they once more attacked and beat the Pathruts. No one dared to go against the so-called bigwigs of Kawatha.

'You are thieves by profession then why don't you pay Rs. 251 as the Mahadev Fair levy?' remarked the Sarpanch, the Patil and other rich Marathas and beat Shiva Jadhav and others so severely with sticks and axes that had there been weaklings in their places they would have died on the spot. Their head wounds had to be sutured with twelve stitches. Their backs and thighs were covered with long green scars of

the beatings with sticks. Their backs looked like pancakes riddled with holes. Mahadu Kisan Jadhav, Shiva Jadhav and his sister Kalabai, their mother Radhabai, and wife, Lochana, were severely beaten. Even then the police refused to help these people they belonged to a branded community of criminals.

I took these people with me to the police station at Umerga, a Taluka Headquarters. There also the police refused to register a compaint. They even refused to send these severely beaten people to the hospital.

Then I met a political leader of Kawatha. I appraised him of the situation. He told me, 'This is an affair among the people of my place. You don't poke your nose in this matter. Even if we quarrel today, tomorrow we shall unite ourselves in a common cause. We will settle this case in our village. I'll see who dares take this to the police and how the police enter this place, when I'm the leader here.'

So instead of coming to our help, this was how he threatened us. Then I rang Shri Chaudhari, the then S.P. At Usmanabad from Umarga Post Office and told him, 'If your police do not arrive at Kawatha by four in the morning, the vagabonds of this place will murder at least two or three people to our community. Please give full protection against the attackers. If anything untoward happens, your police department will be responsible.'

That was the first time I had warned an SP in such outspoken terms on a telephone and got police constables stationed by 5 in the morning in the village, political leader of which had poasted that he would not allow the police to enter his village.

Then again, Maratha hooligans from the village Sindhwadi had attacked the Wadar community of the place because they had taken water from a public well. Hanamant Wadar was killed in the attack. Then Marathas then brought pressure on the Wadars forcing them to bury him in the village. They prohibited the Wadars from going out of the village lest they inform the police and the news become public.

One Wadar, Pawar by name, managed to come to me

surreptitously. I was then at Latur. He narrated me the incidents and then told that the Marathas had threatened to kill any active worker of the community organization who went there.

I took Pawar with me on a motorcycle and went to the village. The attackers were frightened and went away quietly with their sticks and axes. I had arrived on a motorcycle, so they thought a man from the C.I.D. had come for investigation. I went to Usmanabad and registered a complaint at the police station. The police immediately came to Sindhwadi and arrested some Marathas. They were released on bail soon afterwards. I went back and enquired. I was informed that since the accused had already been arrested in the same case, they could not be re-arrested for the same offence hence they were released. The so-called prestigious bigwigs — in fact, hooligans of Sindhwadi—had killed Hanumant Wadar and thrown his corpse on a dung-heap as one would kill and throw a cock. Hamant Wadar's wife and children were rendered helpless without anyone to protect and maintain them.

Similarly a Pardhi family of Moha in Taluka Kalamb was harassed and maltreated. I have come to the conclusion, after a careful study, that the police and the landlords of this region in Usmanabad district have deliberately created conditions in which the Pardhis are forced to resort to thieving and poaching. I have lived among several groups of Pardhis and carefully gathered bits of information.

The Pardhis own lands and try to live a decent life in Moha. They are persecuted by the local hooligans. One day a big van full of police descended on this village and for the first time in this district the police Patil, the Sarpanch and other bigwigs were arrested for attacking the people of the Nomadic and Denotified Tribes. The Pardhi community of this place was given police protection for a month. The other people of the village collected contributions for defending the Patil and the Sarpanch in a criminal case. The police Patil and the Sarpanch were released on bail.

This incident was published in several newspapers all over

Maharashtra. The publication of the report that the village bigwigs behave like goondas must have lowered their prestige in the eyes of the readers. The result of this was: the harassment and the unjust treatment of the Pardhis was stopped. the periodical instalments of the Police-Patil ceased. Ashok Alkute, Chandrakant Gaikwad, Jagu Gaikwad, Jewalikar, Kushabai Pawar and several other community workers had rendered valuable help in this affair. An organisation of the Nomadic and Denotified Tribes was thus formed in Umarga Taluka.

Now I started working in the cause of the Nomadic and Denotified people all over Marathwada. I organized processions and gatherings on a large scale involving thousands of participants on Taluka and District levels at Bhoom, Ambejogai, Beed, Majalgaon, Basmat, Kandhar, Ahmedpur, Kalamb, Udgir, Nilanga, Ausa and such other places.

I took part in the agitations and Satyagraha to rename the Marathwada University as Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar University. I, along with many workers of the Nomadic community, took part in the big rally and Satyagraha at Bombay. That was the first occasion that I had participated in such a large scale activity. I was arrested and put into the Yerawada Prison. That was my first arrest and imprisonment as a political worker. I was in the jail for fourteen days, in which period I had an opportunity of meeting several political and social workers.

I began to visit all the places from where reports of injustice to and harassment of the Nomadic and Denotified Tribes flowed to me. I heard that girls from Shindewadi in Usmanabad Taluka were trapped in false criminal cases by a process called 'Takmudya'. Takmudya is a fraudulant practice in which the police take the help of a landlord, who is particularly at cross-purposes with the Pardhis. The police register a compaint of theft of a watch or a ring at the house of that landlord. They put the alleged stolen articles in the house of a Pardhi stealthily. The Pardhi is then arrested and slapped with a false charge.

In Shindewadi, a Pardhi — Kale by name — was a farmer.

The police practised 'Takmudya' on him. Pardhis, whenever arrested in such a way, try to steal to raise money for securing bail. Otherwise they sell some articles from their house to raise money. On receiving money the police release them. If no money is received in a couple of days, the police in an attempt to frighten them into bringing money, file a case in accordance with the provisions of the Criminal procedure. Then they bring the accused out of custody and beat him. All this is known as 'Takmudya'. Kale was arrested in such a way. I complained to the superiors against the police repeatedly, but all the complaints went unheeded. Such harassment of the Pardhis in Usmanabad District and in Marathwada persists even today.

Circumstances force a person to steal. The police build houses and feather their nests on the earnings of these thieves. They confiscate the alleged stolen goods and other articles of the Pardhis. But they do not show in their registers the particulars of all the confiscated goods, only damaged and useless property is registered. The goods that are in a good condition are shared by the police among themselves.

On many occasions the Pardhis show receipts for the goods confisated. But the police tear these receipts and misappropriate the goods. The poor Pardhis are helpless. Their plight is like that of a miserable dumb woman in a well known sying: 'A dumb woman complains, but there's neither a whimper nor a howl.'

The society refuses to accept them, and the police instead of protecting them harass them. A Pardhi house has hardly more than three or four aluminum utensils. Even then a Pardhi is regarded as a notorious thief, but an officer who amasses crores of rupees in underhand and corrupt dealings is treated with dignity and respect. He owns at least one bunglow in every city and town he is posted at.

Once in a Pardhi locality near Latur, Hirabai Kale, a Pardhi woman, had given birth to a child. After she delivered the child, she had nothing to eat. Her husband had been arrested under the charge of a theft. The woman lived only on water. At last she underwent a tubectomy operation under

the Family Planning Scheme for which she received Rs. 200. She bought half a gunny-bag of high-quality *jowar* out of the amount so received.

A farmer of a neighbouring village happen to register a compaint of the theft of *jowar* from his field at about the same time. The police could not trace the thief anywhere. Since they could not trece the thief, they descended upon the locality of the Pardhis and found half a gunny-bag of high quality *jowar* in the hut of this woman, who was still recovering from her recent delivery.

The police grilled her: 'From where did you get this half a gunny-bag of *jowar*?' Poor Hirabai begged and entreated piteously, 'Saheb, I've just delivered a child, and I've nothing to eat. My husband, thanks to you, is in jail. I got myself operated under the Family Planning Scheme. Out of the Rs. 200 they paid for it, I've purchased this half a gunny-bag of *jowar*. Saheb, I've become so weak that I've no milk in my breasts for my offspring. That's why I've purchased this jowar.'

She even showed the medical chit that had recorded her operation. But the police simply ignored it and arrested Hirabai and put her in custody along with her offspring. Hirabai's mother came to me weeping and told me, 'My daughter has recently delivered a child. She has been arrested by the police. Please get her out of their clutches.'

I ran to the police station immediately and met the Sub-Inspector and requested him to release the woman. The Sub-inspector chided and warned me, 'Look, these people are thieves by nature. If you take their side, you'll be considered an abettor.'

I was angry at this reply and retorted: 'You arrest the women of Nomedic and Denotified Tribes. You do not even employ lady-police constables for this purpose. You keep our women in the police custody at night. How do we know that you do not rape them?' There was some effect of my talk on him and he released Hirabai and her child. He asked them to be present in the court next day.

The British Government had decreed that the Pardhis and

other Nomadic Tribes were thieves by nature and birth. They had prepared a list of all such tribes. On the attainment of Independence Pandit Nehru had declared that no community or tribe could ever be thieves by nature and birth, and these tribes, which were regarded as criminal, were denotified. In a way they were set free from such social and legal stigma and branding.

But even today in Free India the police and the Government administration instead of giving these tribes opportunities to develop, bring false charges against innocent persons like Hirabai and her poor child and arrest them. Many children of Nomadic and Denotified Tribes are accused of being criminals and jailed in their childhood. In fact, it is the police who push there young ones into criminal activity by such barbarous treatment.

If a bird is confined to life in a house by clipping its wings lest it flies away, it is forced to remain in the same house all its life. Even it it wishes to fly, it cannot. Absolutely in the same way once a person from these tribes is shoved into jail right at his birth, he gets inextricably bonded to it. Even if anybody tries to retrieve such a person from his prison or the person himself tries to escape from it he cannot come out of that hell. Because his wings are clipped in early childhood. He bears the indelible brand of a criminal on his forehead for all to see. Even if a criminal tries to improve himself in all honesty and sincerity, he is not allowed to do so by the society in which he lives. This was implanted in me by Hirabai's infant.

Once the members of a Pardhi community living at Dhoke were barbarously slaughtered as criminals. The hooligans from the neighbouring villages killed seven Pardhis. Even after this massacre the killers were acquitted and set free. I brought five young boys from Dhoke to Latur. They were the sons of those who were either killed in the attack or had narrowly escaped the slaughter by a quirk of fortune. These five boys had no criminal record against them. They had all the intention to work honestly and live a decent life. I got them employed in the spinning mill at Latur. Even after the employment they were faced with the stark problem of

securing living accommodation. I roamed with these boy all over Latur in search of a room on hire. Nobody was willing to give them a room on hire only because they were Pardhi boys. At last I arranged accommodation for them with my friend, Rajendra, who is a social worker.

They started going regularly to their work. All the five worked in the same shift. They settled down to good work. I had gone out of Latur for some work, and somebody informed the Police Sub-Inspectar that some Pardhi boys were working in the spinning mill at Latur.

The Sub-Inspector visited the mill. The boys were working in the first shift. Their shift was over at three, and as soon as they came out of the mill, the Sub-Inspector arrested them. They were taken to the Police Station and beaten severely with a warning that they were not to enter the Usmanabad-Latur region again. They were put into a police-van and taken to their room. The Sub-Inspector abused and chided the landlord for hiring out a room to Pardhis. Then the boys were released fifteen kilometres away from Latur.

The boys pleaded, 'Saheb, please allow us to work in our present job. There's no criminal record against us.' But the cruel Sub-Inspector paid no heed to their entreaties. Just as a tender sapling is plucked and thrown in the garbage, the Sub-Inspector of Latur uprooted these boys from the decent life they were trying to live and throw them into the hell of the criminal world. The Police Sub-Inspector thus had the lion's share in turning them into criminals.

On my return to Latur I came to know of the incident. I asked the Manager of the mill. He told me 'The boys had done no wrong in the mill. They had settled to good work. I don't know why the police arrested them.'

I then went to the Police Station and enquired. The Sub-Inspector was not present at the station. A Jemadar told me that the Sub-Inspector had gone on a tour, and asked me to meet him the next day. The next day I went again and met the Sub-Inspector. I said to him: 'The names of these boys have not been registered at the Police Station as thieves, they have not committed any offence so far, so I got them employed in

the spinning mill. Saheb why did you treat them thus?'

The Police Sub-Inspector replied, 'They are Pardhis and residents of Usmanabad District. They must work or take up a job in their Taluka. Why should they enter this region? They may under the guise of service start thieving business here, what can we do under such circumstances? Will you stand security for their good conduct?'

I said, "It's alright, I'll stand surety for their conduct."

The Sub-Inspector warned me once again, 'Look, if there's anything amiss, we'll hold you responsible.'

Once again I replied, 'It's alright, I'll be responsible.'

I went back to those Pardhi boys. But the police had beaten them so severely that they were frightened out of their wits. They said: 'We don't want work, Saheb; the police will still beat us. They thrashed us asking us all the time if we'd ever dare take a job in that town again, and took us far away from Latur in their van and left us there. We walked thirty kilometres. Our feet were swollen.' They refused to join back in spite of my assurances and I was forced to keep quiet, in spite of the gross injustice perpetrated by the police.

Now I had involved myself a good deal in the welfare activities concerning the Nomadic and Denotified Tribes spread all over Marathawada. This brought me into close contact with political activists from several regions. And I was invited wherever Nomadic and Denotified Tribes were being subjected to inhuman atrocities and gross injustice.

There was quite a sizeable *Laman Tanda*,[95] living at Murum in Taluka Umrup. Some landlords from that place forcibly raped young girls from this Tanda. One day these hooligans in a drunken condition descended on these poor people and indulged in all sorts of debauchery.

One Babu Rathod among them mustered courage to warn them, 'Malak, don't you dare assault and debauch the people of our Tanda again.' Their landlordish ego was hurt by this admonition; they returned to their place and collected hooligans, plied them with drinks, brought them to the Laman Tanda and attacked the people mercilessly.

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[95]*Laman Tanda* : A group of Lamans, a nomadic tribe.

In the attack Babu Rathod, his wife and mother were seriously injured. They were beating Babu Rathod so severely that his wife threw herself on his body begging the hooligans not to beat him. Her three-year-old daughter was in her arms. The landlords along with their hooligans attacked so cruelly that they did not spare even the young child. She was so badly wounded that she died on the spot.

Babu Rathod was taken to a hospital in Solapur in an unconscious state. Babu's mother's arm was broken. Even after all these atrocities the police deliberately delayed the registration of the complaint. The poor Lamans' received no help though there was a police station in the town because the police station was under the influence of the local hooligans.

The atrocities and injustice did not stop there. The Police Inspector registered the death of the young daughter as a sudden death and instructed the people to bury her immediately. But the people from the Tanda refused to do anything without a post-mortem of the girl's death. The Police Inspector took them to the Police Station and kept the dead body in their custody for twenty-four hours. The mother was made to sit outside.

The police tried to reason with the bereaved mother, 'Your daughter's already dead. Why do you want to go against these bigwigs? Part your thumb impression here on this paper and bury your daughter.' She refused to oblige them.

The police had kept in their custody, under lock and key, the dead body of the daughter, denying it to the mother who had borne her in her womb for nine months and nine days; and it took more than twenty four hours to carry out the necessary post-mortem. The poor mother was made to sit there all through the night. This information had been passed to me through a messenger; and I had immediately gone to Murum on a motor-bike along with my friend, Shivaji, and enquired about the condition of the people of the Tanda.

A similar incident took place at Salukwadi in Ahmedpur Taluka. There are some houses of Masanjogis in Salukwadi. These Masanjogis roam around visiting nearby villages and live in the local cemetery. That is their home. They beg for a living.

The Masanjogis of Salukwadi lived in similar way begging and eking out meagre livelihood life. Once a landlord of Kingaon was robbed. He was a man of high repute in the town. He was after the police to find the culprits. He threatened to report to the superiors, if the police failed to discover the thief. The police Inspector and the constables of Kingaon were at their wit's end and under much pressure. They just could not lay their hands on the thief. They had promised to get at the culprits within five days.

The people of the town had tried to apprehend the thieves the very day the theft had taken place. But the thieves had escaped. The people had told that there were three thieves. Even their features were described. But the police could not trace them, so a demand was made for the police dog-squad. The dogs were taken all round, they lingered and sniffed about on the road. Then they began to bark looking towards Salukwadi. The police marched towards Salukwadi. When the police and the dogs arrived at Salukwadi, the dogs were not barking. In fact, the dogs followed the police, wherever they went.

The police, however, went directly to Masanjogi's locality without going to any other place. They began to search Masanjogis' huts. The poor Masanjogis were at home. The police began to thrash whoever was at home, including women and children. The poor people were terribly frightened. They just could not understand why the police were beating them.

After a search of the Masanjogi's huts, the police brought out a couple of aluminium vessels plates, bowls, a ladle, a pan and eating bowl, a head-dress decorated with peacock feathers, a pair of old worn-out *chappals* given by somebody as alms; torn, multi-coloured clothes and a *chipli*[96] used while begging for alms.

The police began to ask each and every person to show cash-memos of these articles. They asked for cash-memos of the clothes worn. The Masanjogis were frightened and began to weep embracing one another. And the police continised beating them with sticks all the while.

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[96]*Chipli* : A wooden musical contraption.

In this search they found a brass *parat*[97]. It had holes in it. A name, Kulkarni, was engraved on its side. That made the police believe that these people were thieves. They rained blows on them with their sticks. All the people from the town had gathered there. They muttered among themselves, wondering how the Masanjogis, who had never stolen before, came to steal this time.

The man in whose house the brass *parat* was found, was a blind man of around thirty or thirty-five years. But the police registered him as the accused No. 1. That blind man eked out his living by begging around in nearby villages with the help of his children. He used to dress as a peacock-Masanjogi and roam around begging with only an iron bell in his hand. He did not have the peacock-feathered-headgear usually worn by peacock-Masanjogis. So he begged by clanging the iron bell in his hand and shouting loudly *Har-Har Mahadeo.* He very much wanted to make a peacock-feathered headgear, so wherever he went he begged for a broken brass *parat* and old clothes. He often got old wornout clothes, but he could not obtain a broken brass *parat*. He wanted a brass *parat* because he could then cut long strips out of it and use them in his headgear. Peacock feathers are stuck into these brass strips. He had peacock feathers, but the poor man had not been able to get a *parat* for a long time.

Once as usual he had gone to a neighbouring village for begging alms. Kulkarni, a brahmin living in that village, had marked that this blind man, whenever he came to the village, begged for a brass *parat*. So he had given him an old leaking *parat* and fulfilled his long-cherished desire. The Masanjogi had been quite pleased. He had thought that he too would now prepare a head gear like those of other Masanjogis, and with this thought had kept the old parat in his hut. The police came across this *parat* in their search.

The police instantly began to grill the blind man. They began to beat him and asked him, 'Tell us which Kulkarni you robbed to get this *parat*?'

He told the police again and again, 'Saheb, a brahmin from

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[97]*Parat* : A broad-brimmed plate used for kneading.

Ramegaon has given me this *parat*.' But the police did not believe him. The *parat* had so many big holes in it, that when a police constable held it to read the name engraved on it, his face could be clearly seen through the holes. In spite of all these obvious facts, the police arrested the blind peacock-Masanjogi along with fifteen-twenty other people in which there were some women and children also, and took them to the Kingaon Police Station.

The landlord at whose house the theft had taken place, had explicitly stated in his complaint that there were three thieves. People had, moreover, seen the thieves while they were running away, but simply because the police could not apprehend the real thieves, they arrested fifteen Masanjogi persons as thieves.

In fact, Masanjogis never steal. Many people from the town told the police, 'Saheb, these people are not in the habit of stealing.'

One of the Masanjogis, Gangaram Mukutmore, lived at Chakur. He came to know of the arrests. He went to Kingaon and met the Police Inspector and entreated to him: 'Don't harass poor, simple folk, Saheb. We're not thieves. You've arrested even women.' The Inspector demanded five hundred rupees to release only the women. 'Gangaram went back to Chakur. One of his sons is a driver and owns two three-acres of land. So he somehow managed to collect three hundred and fifty rupees from various sources. Only when he handed over the sum to the Inspector did the police release the women.

Four or five days after this incident somebody told Gangaram Mukutmore: 'There is a Laxman Gaikwad in Latur who is an active worker of the Nomadic and Denotified Tribes' Organization, you should seek his help.'

A Masanjogi approached me. I, along with fellow-activists and Vilas Mane, visited the place. When we went to the Masanjogi settlement, we saw that sixty-year old woman was lying prostrate on the ground. The police had taken away her two sons. The old woman had fallen in their way and had piteously pleaded, 'Saheb, my sons have committed no theft, please don't take them away.'

The merciless police constables had clobbered the woman so much that her backbone had got fractured. She was lying on the ground, and wailing her prayer to God, 'Oh God, take me to your bosom soon.'

I went near her and tried to console her, 'Grandmother, I'm like your son. Don't worry. I'll get your sons released.'

The old woman had not taken a drop of water or a morsel of food for three days. She was weeping all the while. When I went there, the people were frightened. They thought I too was from the police department. When Gangaram Mukutmore assured them I was one of them and working for them, they began to recount all the atrocities inflicted on them.

I arrived at Kingaon with the Masanjogi women and children, met the police inspector and asked him what the matter was. He tried to gloss over the serious situation with an obviously hollow explanation. He said, 'We've arrested these people as suspects. We've to arrest suspected persons when we're investigating a registered complaint.'

In fact, he had not expected that anyone would come forth championing the cause of the Masanjogis and question the propriety of the police action. That was why he had harassed them so much.

I asked the Inspector, 'Saheb, why did you extort money from these people? Return their money, watches and household articles.' He immediately returned the household articles, but I shall never forget it was different from the usual one. This was the one only Inspector who had ever told the truth.

He said, 'Look Sabed, after all I'm an Inspector. What's my pay? I somehow pay the rent and maintain my wife and children. But when our superiors visit us, we've to arrange for them the costliest wines and food. Each party costs no less than four to five hundred rupees at least. Now tell me, if I spend all this money out of my pay, will not my children and wife starve?' I only remarked, 'Saheb, it does not become your position and dignity to exploit such poor people and throw parties to please your superiors. This'll put an end to the faith people have in you.'

Then he promised to give back the money and release the

arrested persons. There was another reason. I had threatened to squat in protest in front of the police station along with all the women and children till we secured their release. This made the Inspector fear that the situation was fraught with serious consequences and he was quite concerned, so much so that he released some persons and registered a case against three persons.

Similar terrifying incidents were reported from five other Talukas. Here is an incident from Ganjur. A Jayaba Gaikwad lives at Ganjur in Taluka Ahmedpur. He lives by farming and supplements his income by operating a tile polishing machine for building contractors. When he could not secure any work and farming was impossible for some reason, he worked at a lake project under the Employment Guarantee Scheme.

At this very time a purse containing ten thousand rupees belonging to a merchant from Latur was picked. The police could not lay their hands on the thief, so they started investigating the theft by exploring the localities where the so-called criminal tribes lived.

Some time back a Jemadar had asked Jayaba to sell his land to him at an unreasonably low price, and Jayaba had refused the deal. The Jemadar was still angry about the refusal.

Jayaba belongs to the Pathrut tribe, that is one of the tribes notified as criminal. The Jemadar told the police Sub-Inspector that Jayaba or someone from his gang must have picked the purse and if he was apprehended, the real theif could be traced. The police went to Ganjur to arrest Jayaba, but they were informed that Jayaba was working at a lake project under the Employment Guarantee Scheme. He was arrested while he was at work.

He begged and pleaded, 'Saheb, I'm working here by this lake for the last six months. I've committed no unlawful act. Why do you arrest me?'

But poor Jayaba did not know that he was born with the mark of a notified criminal tribe branded on him. So Jayaba was arrested simply because be belonged to one of the criminal tribes.

Newspapers headlined their reports to the effect that a

notorious pickpocket and housebreaker had been arrested by the Latur police. The newspapers further reported that through this arrest many more previous offences would come to light.

To apprehend the thief was a matter of dire necessity and departmental prestige for the police because the person whose pocket was picked was a social bigwig closely related to a minister.

The police wanted a pat on the back and commendation for the efficiency and competence with which their department investigated offences and brought the culprits to book.

So in their zeal they arrested the innocent Jayaba and asked for seven days remand for further investigation and they thrashed and tortured him so much that had that been continued for a couple of days more, he would have died in police custody.

Jayaba himself told me of these beatings and tortures. At about this time a similar theft was reported at Beed. Assuming that the Beed theft might be an accomplice who had committed the theft at Latur, Jayaba was sent to Beed. The Beed police sent him back reporting that he was not the wanted thief.

Jayaba had come to me after a fortnight. He was beaten so much that the skin from his body had peeled off. Jayaba was hung by his legs with his head hanging down and lashed on the soles with a whip three times a day. They thrust chilli powder in his eyes and rectum and continued to beat him. The skin was peeled off his palms and soles and lash marks were clearly visible on his buttocks.

This incident took place in October 1982. While beating him the police warned him that until he confessed that he had committed the theft, he would continue to receive beatings. Finally he could stand the beatings and tortures no more. So he confessed that he had committed the theft. He took the police to his hut telling them the money was at home. The police searched the hut. Nothing was found in it. Since he was arrested, there was not even a morsel of food in his hut, even for rats to eat. When there was not even a grain of *jowar* how

could there be money in the hut?

Frightened of beatings and tortures Jayaba began to say anything that came to his now near insane mind. Jayaba's wife and a son were on the farm at this time. Then the police took Jayaba to his wife on the farm and said to her, 'Tell us where the money is hidden'. The wife replied, 'Saheb, what money can there be with the poor like us?'

At this reply the police Sub-Inspector kicked her with his boot. The poor, unfortunate wife of Jayaba crashed down. The Jemadar, who was with the Sub-Inspector, picked her up holding here by the bun of her hair, shouted, 'You harlot, you're pretending.' And again they thrashed her mercilessly. They threw her down on the ground and walloped her to their hearts content. Jayaba could not stand the sight of such merciless beating. He felt that his wife was being tortured in his pressence. What was the use of such a life, he reflected.

There was a well nearby on the farm. Finally he mustered courage and caught hold of his wife and ran towards the well, thinking that they would jump in the well and commit suicide. They had no more nerve to stand beatings. As they were about to jump, the police nabbed them and accused them that they were trying to escape from the hands of the police.

As the police began to beat Jayaba and his wife, the neighbours gathered on the spot and began to look in surprise. Some of them were courageous enough to tell the police, 'Saheb, Jayaba is a farmer, not a thief.' The police countered that by saying that he himself had confessed his guilt.

Jayaba then requested one of the farmers; 'Saheb, please accept my farm as a mortgage and lend me two thousand rupees.'

The farmer was moved by the miserable condition of Jayaba and agreed to lend the amount. Then all went to the town in the police jeep. The police themselves wrote down and showed how a mortgage-deed was to be made. The Sub-Inspector, moreover told the Jemadar to add five-hundred rupees to the agreed loan, 'Write five hundred rupees more,

we'll need to cover our expenses,' he said. So the original amount of two thousand was scored off and two thousand five hundred was written in its place. I have still retained that decument as evidence of the transaction.

The next day the farmer withdrew the amount from the bank in Latur and went to the police station and handed over the amount to the Sub-Inspector. He kept five hundred rupees for himself and paid the remaining two thousand rupees in the court as the amount of the theft recovered from Jayaba.

Then I took Jayaba to several journalists, because I very much wanted to publicize the Jayaba affair as an eye-opener to the atrocities and flagrant injustice of the police against innocent, helpless poor victims. Wherever Jayaba went he lifted his shirt and dhoti to show the marks and scars of the beatings.

This did not produce the desired effect. But a few days later, the thief, who had picked the purse and stolen the amount was traced and apprehended. I went to the police station and asked that heartless Sub-Inspector to account for his injustice. The Sub-Inspector answered, 'Jayaba is innocent. But I had to arrest him under the pressure brought on me by some persons. I have paid Jayaba's money in the Court. I'll reimburse Jayaba's amount from my own pocket. But, Gaikwad-Saheb, do not take up this matter against me to a higher level.'

Finally, I issued a public statement of the injustice perpetrated against Jayaba and the members of his family and demanded a judicial inquiry into it on November 7, 1982. When Babasaheb Bhosle, the Chief Minister of Maharashtra has visited Latur, but all in vain. While I was writing this book, Jayaba was honourably acquitted in a case against him in December, 1986. Jayaba was acquitted, but the court did not order to refund Jayaba's money, which had been paid to the court. Exasperated, I resolved to take out a big rally in protest against this injustice.

In the meanwhile a new District—Latur—was formed and since Assistant Superitendent of Police Patnaik was the Head of the Department, no one was willing to organize a protest-

rally. But I had firmly decided to organize a unique rally in Latur.

It was essential that the never-ending acts of injustice be stopped. And for this purpose it was inperative that there be stopped. And for this purpose it was imperative that there be a public demonstration of the organized unity of the Nomadic and Denotified Tribes. I had deliberately declared as a warning to the perpetrators of injustice that the rally would be known as the 'Sickle and Banner Morcha'. The motive behind the choice of this name was our determination to fight with the sickle and the hammer against the perpetrators of injustice. I travelled all over Marathwada and met various activists and party workers to organize and make preparations for this rally.

While I was travelling round distributing bulletins, my motor-cycle was involved in an accident at the Ausa turning. My friend, Uttam Mane, who was riding with me, was thrown twenty feet away. I, along with my motor-cycle, rose high in the air and fell in a ditch. In fact, I was saved because I did not loosen my grip on the Motor-cycle. I was hit by the petrol-tank of the motorbike in a critical pat of my body and rendered unconscious. People living near by gave me water to drink and took me to a dispensary at Ausa. I recovered, but the motor-cycle I had borrowed from my friend for organizing the rally, was badly damaged. I was very sorry on that account.

The date fixed for the rally was November 25, 1982 so I moved round in that condition. At last the golden day for the Nomadic and Denotified Tribes dawned. The rally started from the Nehru Chowk on November 25. People of the Nomadic Tribes from all over Marathwada had gathered in such large numbers that the rally drew attention and became the subject of discussion all over Maharashtra.

People belonging to several tribes and castes had participated in the rally in their traditional colourful costumes. More than ten thousand people of Masanjogi, Raindar, Vasudeo, Gondhali, Wadar, Pathrut, Gosavi, Kaikadi, Vaidu, Pardhi, Mang, Garudi, Katkar, Bhoi, Lamani, Shikalkari, Ghisadi and many

other tribes had participated in the rally bringing with them donkeys, dogs, pigs, cocks and brandishing in their hands sickles and hammers. They had gathered in such a large number for the first time and shouted slogans, 'Save us from injustice', 'Give us houses,' 'Give us work,' 'Brand not the tribe as criminal merely because of its name,' 'Rehabilitate us.'

Laxman Mane and Balkrishna Renke had participated in this rally. When we went to the Collector to submit our charter of demanda, the Collector left to go hme saying that he had no time to spare for us. All journalists had commended on this their papers.

Never before had such a rally and procession marched down the roads in the history of Latur. *Girijans*[98] had just begun to take to the streets to demand justice for themselves. Newspapers all over Maharashtra had given prominent publicity to the indifferences shown by the Collector in going home without taking any notice of the rally. Many thinkers and social workers wrote in support of the rally. Several newspapers had discussed the rally in their editorials.

There was definitely a fall in the number of atrocities on the poor people of Nomadic and Denotified tribes after the rally. This was its positive gain. But we cannot yet say that atrocities and injustice have stopped for good.

Movements and organizations of the Nomadic and Denotified Tribes grew in scale and stature. People were tired of continuons conflicts and confrontations. I began to think in terms of stopping the aid I was getting from the Oxfam. Whatever the money I received from it, I spent on the organization and work of Nomadic and Denotified tribes. Since I stopped accepting that money, the problem of maintaining the household raised its head once again. A sort of disintegration of the family affairs set in. As the head of the family I had to shoulder the responsibility of looking after my family. My life companion and friend - my wife Chhabutai needed my attention and I had to provide for my daughter Sangita, Manjusha, and my son Prafullakumar.

So once again I was caught in financial problems. My

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[98]*Girijans* : Those who live in mountains and forests

friends, who worked with me in the organizational work, did help me with money for some time. I too, undaunted by the difficulties, worked in building and strengthening the organization of the Nomadic and Denotified Tribes. Even though I faced monetary difficulties, I did not let that affect the work of the organization. But during this period often the circumstances used to be so acute and uncontrollable that I could hardly provide even a meal a day for my children.

I remember once I had gone to Usmanabad to look into the assault on a nomadic tribe. At that time my youngest child, Prafullakumar had fallen seriously ill. He was kept at home for two days, without medical assistance, for there was no money in the house to take him to a dispensary. It so happened that my friend and activist, Sude had come to see me from Nilanga and as usual, in a light mood, had said to my wife, "Vahini, please give me something to eat."

That day Prafullakumar was ill. There was no money to take him to a doctor. There was not even a morsel of food in the house. Being in my company all along, my wife was aware of the problems of social work. She opened her heart before my colleague, "See, my husband has not come home for five-six days. Prafulla is not feeling well. There's no money in the house to take him to a doctor and there is no jowar in the home. My children are without food."

Instantly Sude put his hand in his pocket, brought out forty rupees and gave my wife that money. Only then she could take Prafulla to a dispensary and buy some *jowar* and feed the children.

On my return Chhabu told me everything. I was deeply hurt to hear it. Why should such stark poverty come to my lot?

To add to this my younger brother Bhagwan Gaikwad died of overdrinking quite suddenly. He was working in the spinning mill in Latur. He drank every day. On that day his old cronies had come to see him. He drank country liquor with them and ate oily *bhajis* at night. He was troubled by hiccups. The next morning Kesarbai, his wife, came to me and said: "Your Anna is seriously ill, he must be taken to a dispensary, please come with me."

I was very frightened. All these days he was alright. How was it that he had become seriously ill all of a sudden. Harassed with such reflections I took Anna to a dispensary in a rickshaw. We showed him to a doctor: but it was a hopeless case. Anna was awfully restless: he was troubled by an unceasing spell of hiccups. And he died in a matter of moments.

The doctor told us to take him home as he was cold dead without a glimmer of life in him. I burst into tears. I was very much worried about his children: A daughter and three young sons. I was worried about how they were going to be educated.

I sent messages of Anna's death to all the relatives and they gathered. As per the custom of our community, the relatives came with liquor and began to drink to drown their sorrow. My eldest brother, Manikdada, went with all the relatives who were ready to take him to drink, and drank with them in the ritualistic observance of sorrow and continuously kept falling on Anna's dead body.

There was no money to make the funeral and cremation arrangements. My brother who was at Aurangabad, was better placed than the rest of us. So we waited for him in the hope that he would spare money for the funeral and cremation arrangements. But he took a long time to arrive.

We could not ask our sister-in-law if she had money, as she was now a widow deeply steeped in sorrow. At last Sambha Bhau arrived from Aurangabad. I told him our difficulties. We three brothers - calculated the cost of the funeral arrangement. We agreed that the three of us would share the expenditure, whatever it might be. I had borrowed fifty rupees from one of my friends in the morning. I handed over that amount to my brother. We collected the things required to make a bamboo stretcher to carry Anna's dead body, as also firewood and cowdung-cakes for the cremation.

The relatives had plied Manikdada with so much liquor that we had appoint a man to take care of him. In the meanwhile, somebody made a snide remark that Anna's wife had killed him by poisoning him through his drink. As it is

my sister-in-law was overwhelmed with grief at her husband's death, and this circulating comment made her burst into such a violent fit of weeping that her teeth and jaws were locked. We tried to console and assure her that whatever people might say we would not desert her.

Finally, the bamboo-stretcher to carry Anna's body for cremation was ready. Manikdada was to carry the earthern pot with a fire in it in a coir-net, but he was so drunk that he was totally useless for any mental and physical activity. Sambha-Bhau had to leave for Aurangabad very early, so he could not carry the pot. There was no one else to hold and carry it. So everybody began to say that as Laxman was the youngest brother, he should be asked to carry the fire-jar. So much against my wishes and beliefs, I had to carry that earthern pot placed in a coir-net.

I had no faith in the tribal customs and traditions and did not in the least care for God or Godhood. Yet I had to bow to the wishes of the gathered relatives. Anna's corpse and I were given a ritual bath. A coir net was prepared. In the coir net was placed an earthern jar with the ritual-fire in it.

All present lent their shoulders in lifting Anna's body and carrying it to the cremation ground. All of them were fully intoxicated. Drums were being beaten in front of the funeral procession. At one time, Manikdada, fully under the influence of liquor, tried to pass Anna's body on to somebody's shoulder. In the attempt he let go his end of the Anna's body. When it was about to fall on the ground, the persons nearby supported it and saved it from falling to the ground. But they too were drunk.

All the women of the household were following close behind. None of them had imbibed liquor. The men were not weeping, for all had imbibed liquor to drown their sorrow. Some of the processionists left the funeral procession on the way, drank liquor and joined the procession again. At last we brought the corpse to the place of cremation in such a desultory fashion.

All the relatives placed Anna's body on the firewood pyre. Anna's young wife's bracelets were broken, her Mangalsutra

was snapped away from her neck and the Kunkum on her forehead was wiped off. The bracelets and Mangalsutra were thrown on Anna's body. And my bereaved sister-in-law wept bitterly all the while, hysterical fits locking her teeth and jaws sometimes.

Then all of us lit the funeral pyre. I was made to bring water in the earthern jar placed in the coir net with wet clothes on. I had to go round the pyre several times. Then we returned home. As per the custom stove was not lighted and food was not cooked in our house. Our neighbours had brought for us some *bhakaris*. Some of the relatives were eating.

Someone said to me, 'Laxman, weeping is futile now. A man dies when his time comes and he departs. Eat a piece of *bhakar*.' I too ate without any heart in it. I was given an axe in my hand, lest an evil spirit haunt me. My forehead was smeared with black powder. They told me that this would keep evil spirits away. Nobody would touch me. They said Anna's soul remained in me for three days. So, I was made to sit in a corner. I was served meals from a distance without anyone touching me. My plate and bowl were kept away from other utensils.

A thought flitted across my mind. In my boyhood the people from our village did not touch me because I was a Pathrut's boy. And now the people from my own house did not touch me because I had carried Anna's earthern jar to the cremation ground.

It was decided that the religious rites for the dead be performed on the third day. The ash from Anna's cremated corpse was scratched off his bones. Then the shoulders of all those who had carried Anna's body were annointed with curd, oil and milk in a sort of ritualistic purgation and these persons were deemed cleansed and could be touched in a normal way. But I was still an untouchable. I was sitting in a corner, like a pregnant woman, on a chaddar with an axe in my hand. I yearned to get free of all these superstitious restrictions. I regretted that I carried the earthern. But I was helpless in these proceeding. I was obliged to do whatever I

was directed to do; I could not hurt the feelings of my relatives and the people at home by displaying my atheistic thoughts.

The carriers of Anna's dead body were free on the third day. But it was decided that I be taken to the river of our native village. A cock was sacrificed on that day. All the things that Anna liked habituated to, were taken. They were: *Bhajias, Paan, Supari tobacco, Bombil*[99]. Even liquor was taken in a bottle. It filled me with deep sorrow to see these proceedings. The liquor that killed Anna was being carried as an offering to propitiate and release his soul. They wanted to ply him with liquor even after his death.

These things were put in a new unused wicker tray and carried to the river. A cock was cooked as an offering there and offered with the necessary rites. A barber was taken to the river. It was decided that my head be shaven clean. I protested: 'Why do you want to shave my head clean, you may cut a few strands if the custom so demands.'

All the relatives were very much displeased and angry to hear me protest thus. They chided me in anger, 'You've lost all sense of propriety and morality by living in cities. Have you forgotten our traditions and customs? This won't do. You must abide by our community's customs if you want your deceased brother's soul to rest in peace.'

I relented, grumbling to myself. 'Let it be, I made a mistake by carrying the earthern jar in the first place.' And I surrendered my head to the barber. He shaved my head clean of all hair with a razor, scraping so thoroughly that my scalp burned with the irritation. Dada, Bhau and Anna had similarly shaved my head with a blade while we were living in our native village. I was reminded of that after many years on this occasion, and I consoled myself with the thought that it was but proper that I should let them shave my head for the brother who used to shave my head in my early boyhood.

But the proceedings did not end there. I was made to bathe in the river. I was brought home in wet clothes. I was made to sit on leaves from some tree and made to eat the ritualistic

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[99]*Bombil* : Bombay duck.

offerings of chicken and other things. Before meals I was given liquor in a cup to drink. I refused but, I had to drink a little to honour the community-custom. All were united against me and I was the only one against all such superstitions. I was helplessly trapped by their obstinacy.

I was offered meals in the wicker tray we had carried to the river. I had somehow tried to eat a couple of bites on the bank of the river. Anna's soul would rest in peace only if I followed all his habits diligently. So I was offered a betel-leaf after meals. I never chew tobacco, but I had to chew it. As soon as I put a little tobacco in my mouth, I shivered and felt uneasy, so I spat it out immediately.

After all these rites, the offerings to Anna's soul were placed in the wicker-tray and the tray was placed on my head. Some fifteen or twenty people then held me and took me into the deep waters of the river. Then they pressed me down under water together with the tray on my head. A little distance from the spot where I was pushed under water, they pulled me up and cast the wicker-tray into the river. Then each one bathed me in turn. That done, I was free of all obligation. I had been told that Anna's soul had entered my body. After these rites it was released and blended with the river-water.

Then all the relatives took their meals on returning home. Offerings were also made to a cow and a crow on the bank of the river. And the leftovers were taken home. I firmly resolved that henceforth I would not carry the earthern-jar-in-coir-net, no matter who was dead.

I began to suffer from acute monetary difficulties. The household had to suffer untold hardships. I felt that neither service nor a shop would help to tide over these difficulties. While I was thinking about ways and means of making money, my friend suggested that supplying construction-materials on contract was a good way of making good money in a relatively short period.

I knew an engineer living at Jayakwadi in Aurangabad. I asked him about this sort of work and he assured me that he would give me some work. I wanted some initial capital for

this. I had purchased a plot just outside Latur at an affordable low price a long time ago. Now Latur District had been formed and the cost of land had shot up considerably. I sold my plot for five thousand rupees and came to Jayakwadi seeking contracts.

This sort of work was new to me, I had no experience of it, and initially I suffered very much. At last a Deputy Engineer approved my tender of twenty-four thousand rupees for certain earth work. I began the work and completed a substantial portion of it within a monty. By then I had spent all the money I had. So I requested the Engineer to make out a running-bill for the work. He prepared the bill.

In the meanwhile I got acquainted with several other contractors from Paithan and Ambad Talukas. I asked one of my friends what now that the bill had been prepared, the further procedure was. He told me, 'Look Gaikwad, if you want to make any money in this business, you must pay some percentage to all and sundry. Then only will your other tenders be approved and you can obtain concessions.'

I enquired about the percentage. He told me, 'You have to distribute about 30 to 35% among the officers: D.E.-10%, G.I. Engineer-10% E.E. Engineer-5%, T. Assistant-1%, T. Engineer-1%, Accountant and Cashier giving the cheque-25 rupees, peon-15 rupees, Clerk of the O.S. Division and Godown Clerk-2%. I had never before been initiated in this affair of giving bribes. I only knew lodging complaints against bribe-taking officers. Now I would be forced to offer bribe-money in this business. I had carried out campaigns against injustice and corruption. I had fought against all sorts of injustice. I was deeply hurt that I was being forced to succumb to bribe-giving.

But the picture of the stark poverty at home stared me in the face. And I came to the conclusion that if I wanted to be in this sort of business, I would be required to do all these things. Thus for the first time I took a bill of 15,000 to the Division Office. All the staff of the Division eyed me curiously as I was a new contractor coming for the first time to that office.

I saluted the D. Engineer and offered tea to all the staff. I moved around getting acquainted with all of them. I told the D. Engineer, 'Saheb, I shall willingly pay whatever is your percentage of the bill.'

The boss acquiesced and the bill was passed for further action as I handed over Rs. 150. At the next stage too I promised to pay whatever the usual percentage was and got the Money Voucher (M.V). sent for further action. The M.V. was passed and returned for payment. The next day I encashed the cheque and paid off the percentages expected by the rest of the persons concerned.

Such transactions were carried out as if they were straightforward, honest deals. The staff never felt that they were indulging in bribery. They considered the bribes as rightfully due to them, for they thought, they helped the contractor to make profit.

I used to undertake works of A-1 category up to Rs. 25,000. For a work of Rs. 25,000 the expenditure incurred on the work proper would amount to Rs. 10,000. More than half of the remaining Rs. 15,000 would be spent on doling out the percentages. Sometimes because of the unduly large expenditure on labour-payment, I would conveniently pass one of the officers by. But when I took the next bill for payment, the officer would withhold the payment for two days reminding me of my failure to pay the percentage for the previous bill to a particular officer. In this respect the staff was staunchly united.

On some occasions I would be left with no money - even for a cup of tea or for the bus-fare. Labourers would nag me for their payment and at just that time the officers would withhold the payment of the bill for my failure to pay the percentages of the previous bills. I would be rendered helpless in such circumstances, even though I was a known party worker.

Then I would cajole other contractors and wheedle some money out of them. I would pay all the officers and staff their percentages. The officers openly received the percentages. Even after making payments to the officers, I had to grovel

before a J.E., a clerk and plead, 'Saheb, I fold my hands. Please pass the bill for payment immediately.'

It was nothing of short of abject surrender of all dignity. I constantly began to feel that I had missed my way. I, who raised my voice against corruption and nepotism, was now helplessly surrendering myself to these evil forces. But where the very sky has burst with the load of corruption, and rivers of corruption are in flood everywhere, what can one humble person do to patch up the sky and dam the rivers?

Wherever the Jayakwadi Canal has reached, cement bags are sold at Rs. 10-15 a bag. So you see even poor men's houses are built with a liberal use of cement. Contractors and engineers sell in collusion thousands of cement bags. You see palatial bunglows belonging to many contractors and engineers at Aurangabad and Parbhani. How can one person ever stem this rot? Many contractors, who worked with me, even workers are steeped in wealth. I have seen some D. Engineers, J. Engineers who had sanctioned dredging-work contracts and made bogus payments amounting to Rs. 30 to 40 lakhs. Tenders for dredging-work of the canal were published, and bills passed for payment without doing any work. When water was released through the canal, they reported further deposits of silt in the canal. No one ever challenged this corruption and nepotism. Even S. Engineers and Chief Engineers had a share in this.

Wherever construction was in progress, cement bags were sold at Rs. 10 each. I used to approach some boss, so that I too might win such a lottery. I used to try and get acquainted with him. I used to throw parties for them. But they enquired about me and knowing that I was a party-worker and a leader of sorts, they would avoid me. They had their coterie of contrators. Contractors and engineers undertook big-budget works in partnership.

At present even J. Enginners collect as much as Rs. 30 to 40 thousand per month. Superior officers, of course, amass far more. In departmental purchases even an increase of 12% amounts to earnings of lakhs of rupees. So you will hardly find a D. Engineer or an E. Engineer without a bunglow of

his own. There would be a very few exceptions.

Sometimes an embarassingly funny situation arises. If a senior officer grabs all the percentage of the cost of a contract or the payment of a bogus bill without sharing it with his junior colleagues, the clandestine deal bursts into a veritable scandal. A person from his office provides all the details of the affairs either to a political leader or a journalist. Then the officer pays thousand of rupees to buy the silence of the political leader or the journalist. Such incidents have occured at Paithan, Jalna, Pathroi, Parbhani, and many other places, but no evidence can ever be obtained to nail the culprits.

Whatever the development and progress the Jayakwadi project may have brought to Marathwada, there is no doubt that it has enriched contractors and agents from Marathwada and some Pune journalists. Some officers keep as pets dogs worth Rs. 10 to 15 thousands today. They kiss their dogs. I have seen them doing it with my own eyes. I feel seeing this, that our people keep dogs to fill their bellies. And these big officers buy dogs with their bloated money to kiss them.

But I feel sad to see that people from the Nomadic and Denotified Tribes are still looked upon as thieves by the police and the society. Their houses are regularly searched. Even their broken and hole-ridden utensils are confiscated. Not even a simple inquiry is held in respect of officers who amass enormous wealth and properties well beyond their legitimate means and income. This is my experience from very close quarters.

Even while I was engaged in contractual work, I was busy in arranging several programmes, gatherings and rallies of the Nomadic and Denotified Tribes in Jalna, Beed, and Parbhani districts.

Once a community Panchayat was convened at Kawatha. It was for my wife's sister. Her name is Salubai. Salubai was married to a man from Solapur. Her husband was a versatile pickpocket. But he had entered into a bigamous marriage. So Salubai's mother obtained Salubai's release from the marriage by paying Rs. 251 as per the custom of our community.

Salubai continued to live with her parents in Kawatha.

Salubai was young and healthy and she fell in love with one Ravan of our own community. Ravan too courted her and entangled her in his love. He lived with her for two years assuring her that he was yet unmarried and would marry her in the near future. A daughter was born to Salubai of him. All the people of Kawatha knew of this. Yet nobody said anything for it was taken for granted that they were married. Ravan's parents, however, chose another match for Ravan and their engagement was finalised.

Salubai had already been married once. She was assured that Ravan would marry her and that he was yet unmarried. So Salubai called for the intervention of the community Panchayat. People from distant parts had gathered to attend the Panchayat. It was resolved in the Panchayat that since a girl had been born to Salubai from Ravan, Ravan should take Salubai as his wife. He must not solemnize another marriage.

There ensured a lot of discussion and argument over this decision. Then on the last day my father-in-law declared, "Brothers, look, Salubai is like a cow. She was sold once to one man and she remained tied to his rope for some time. Then she escaped from that house and came to Kawatha and lived with another man, who was not her formal owner." The community Panchayat mulled over this argument and ruled that Ravan must dip his nose in Salubai's urine and pay Salubai a fine of Rs. 251. The decision was taken unanimously. Salubai collected her urine in a small bowl and gave it in the Panchayat. Ravan dipped his nose into it and was free to marry again.

My father-in-law is blind in one eye. So while we were adjudicating, I thought that all blind men were crafty. In fact he was not blind by birth. My father-in-law had picked a purse containing Rs. 10,000. The police from Solapur tracked the theft and arrived at Kawatha. They surrounded the village in a bid to capture the thief. But my father-in-law along with one boy hid in a large fireplace used for boiling sugarcane juice to prepare jaggery on a farm. He hid there for four days without a morsel of food or a drop of water.

At last, when he thought he might starve to death he came

out of hiding.

The police came to know of this and apprehended him. They grilled and beat him mercilessly to know where he had hidden the stolen amount. At last they tied his legs round his neck and began to lash him with a police-belt. The brass buckle of the belt hit my father-in-law in the eye so forcibly that the eye-ball popped out and hung in the air. He cut it out with his own hands. He has been permanently blind in the left eye.

But he managed to keep the police from seizing the stolen Rs. 10,000. One wonders with which eye he looked at Salubai's case so as to find a solution that the whole Panchayat could approve of. Salubai, however, had to accept her defeat meekly. Salubai's daughter is six-seven years old now, but she has not been admitted to school for want of a father's name. And she is going to remain an ingorant, illiterate, fatherless girl. Finally somebody will initiate her into the stealing profession.

As an activist I had the opportunity of getting acquainted with many social and political workers. I was not formally a member of any of the political parties. I worked to bring together and strengthen the Nomadic and Denotified Tribes' Unions and Organizations at Marathwada.

About this time elections to the Loksabha were declared. In fact, I did not know even know that the Loksabha and Vidhansabha were and what was the difference between the two. Even then the people of the Bahujan Samaj Party approached me as a conscientiously good worker in the cause of the Nomadic and Denotified Tribes. They asked me to contest for a seat to the Loksabha. My first reaction was: how can an insignificant, poor man like me ever contest Parliamentary elections? Besides, I had decided to stay away from politicians and political parties and work only for strengthening the organization of our community.

But the people of Bahujan Samaj Party were after me and they argued that so long as we—the people from the lowest rungs of society—did not involve ourselves in politics, the scheduled caste, adivasis, the harassed and exploited poor

would never get justice in the present social structure. I too agreed with their point of view and consented to contest the election to the Parliament with my mind full of dreams of attaining a seat in Parliament. I felt if ever I was elected as a representative of the poor and a worker in their cause, I would be able to make my voice heard not only in Marathwada but in Delhi as well. I would be able to speak on behalf of those I had been working for all these years. At last I took the decision to contest the Parliamentary elections. I had eight to ten thousand rupees which I had saved in my business.

The Bahujan Samaj Party had assured me that they would spend about fifty to sixty thousand rupees on my election campaigns and asked me to contest the election on their party ticket. I attended two or three of their meetings and was quite elated with the thought that I would contest the parliamentary election with their backing. The time came to fill the nomination form. I paid the deposit of five hundred rupees and obtained the signatures of the proposer and the seconder. All the political commentators began to remark that Laxman Gaikwad was contesting the election and he would bag lakhs of votes from the Nomadic and Denotified Tribes. And I had no notion of how one contested even a grampanchayat election.

But now I was right in the midst of a parliamentary election. Two motor-cycles (one of which was my own dilapidated Java) and six cycles hoisting the blue flags of the Bahujan Samaj Party began to make rounds in Latur canvassing for me. At several strategic points and on walls my name could be seen, painted in large, conspicuous letters. My nomination and election campaigns were the topic of discussion all over Latur District. As far as my own efforts went, I was leaving no stone unturned in the organization of the campaign.

But the Bahujan Samaj Party failed in its assurances. They did not spend money on my election campaign in the way they had promised to earlier. They did not keep their promise for the simple reason that the Party had no powerful

monetary backing. They had to collect money from the masses first and then spend it on the election campaigns. My opponents were moneyed persons with enormous funds at their command. They spent lakhs of rupees on parties and other enticements.

On my side I used to tell my wife to buy some ten kilos of Jowar and distributed bhakar and *pithale*[100] among my workers at all odd hours. I moved all round the district for the campaign. The nine to ten thousand rupees I had were spent in the initial stages of the campaign and I was subsequently by without funds. The voting date was hardly ten - twelve days away.

The Bahujan Samaj Party had promised to send a jeep and money for the campaign at least twenty to twenty-five days before the election day. But I received neither a jeep nor any money. I was totally bankrupt. Some of my workers borrowed money from their friends and we utilized that money to feed our campaigners. Rikshawalas and suppliers of loudspeakers and other campaign material squatted in protest in front of my house for I had failed to pay their dues. Some of them started abusing and cursing me and refused to leave till they received their money.

In the meanwhile, one of my leading and responsible campaigners, Wanzarshe, played me false and campaigned for the rival candidates. He would do without my knowledge and then report to me, "Gaikwad-Sahe, I have campaigned for you through all the villages,' and then go on to add; "The campaigners of the other candidates are hogging chicken, mutton, and biryani; they have hundreds of rupees in their pockets. You're not giving us even bhakar-pithale in time. We'll wait for two more days and if things continue in this way, we'll break away and campaign for other candidates.'

This campaigner had made deals with other candidates behind my back, campaigned for them and more over said to my faithful workers: 'What is Laxman Gaikwad! He himself is a poor beggar. He cannot give us even one meal a day. Why don't you come with me?' He thus and took away many of my workers.

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[100] *Pithale* : Gram flour curry

I had entered into agreements with rickshaw-owners and suppliers of loudspeakers and campaign equipments on the strength of the assurances of the monetary assistance I was to received from the Bahujan Samaj Party. But I did not receive any money from the party, so rickshaw-owners came to me every day, not to campaign for me but to curse and abuse me. I was so much harassed by this that instead of going on campaigns, I began to leave the house at five early in the morning to hide from these people.

I began to think that the people of the Bahujan Samaj Party had played let me down. They had simply used me for their workers had come to meet me. I was trying to hide from the persons I had to pay. I came out when I came to know that someone from the B.S.P. had arrived, Rickshaw-owners and other contractors began to abuse us all in their presence. Seeing my pitiable condition, the B.S.P. man promptly removed a gold ring from his finger and gave it to me. I sold it and paid my creditors some amount as part-payment.

On such occasions my frustration at being let down would be replaced by admiration for the B.S.P. which had such dedicated, determined and sacrificing workers.

By then the voting-day was only eight days away. The B.S.P. sent one jeep. I began the campaign with the help of that jeep. I myself canvassed, moving around in the jeep and shouting slogans: 'Vote the poor to help the poor: Vote for Laxman Gaikwad.' The B.S.P. people had sent only Rs. 500 for diesel expenses.

They had promised to spend 50-60 thousand rupees for my campaign, but as a matter of fact, they had sent us Rs. 500. That amount was not sufficient even for two days' diesel requirements. And the jeep stood in front of my house without any diesel. I literally wept one day. Why did the party treat me so shabbily after persuading me with sweet words and tall promises? What wrong had I done to them for this punishment meted out to me? With such reflections my wife and I used to sit at home weeping and lamenting over our misfortune.

At the outset I had thought that the ideology of the B.S.P.

was wholesome and good. I had known their workers to be a determined and hardworking lot who would stick to their guns come what may. I had the opportunity of seeing honest B.S.P. workers do their work sincerely.

A group of singers, actors and artiss had arrived from Nanded to canvass for me. They canvassed day and night through their programmes without meals or wages. They sang at crowded meetings, erected posters, painted my name is bold letters on walls. They encouraged me and exhorting me not to lose courage. Many volunteer-workers, though they were employed, came to me regularly and campaigned for me on their own initiative and with full sincerity. So I have nothing to say against their workers' honesty and sense of discipline.

But I still do not understand why the B.S.P. as a party treated me so shabbily, why it did not extend full co-operation in the election campaign. As the jeep they sent me for the election campaigns stood idle, I became the laughing stock of mischievous people. Even under these trying circumstances many of the workers continued to render valuable help to me and kept up the tempo of my election-campaign. There were many volunteers who with faith in me rode on cycles far and wide canvassing my candidature, often going without proper meals.

The Latur-election was a subject of hot discussion all over India. My two opponents in the field poured lakhs of rupees into their campaigns. Canvassers had arrived from several places for one of the two candidates. They had come with a specific communal bias and had canvassed for votes on the ground that the candidate was of the voters' community and caste. The casteist approach was openly and brazenly used and very conspicuous in their campaigns. Some candidates had tried to tempt me with offers to buy my support for their candidature. I was firm and determined, and I rejected all such offers.

I very much wanted to fight to the end, but unfortunately I could not do it. The B.S.P. did not come to my help at the critical time. I lost every penny of mine in the election

expenses. Creditors began to pester and abuse me. Some of my workers broke away from me and canvassed for the opponents.

At length, I along with some activists came to the conclusion that it was well nigh impossible to carry on the election-campaign. So we decided to lend our support to a candidate who was contesting on a Congress ticket. In fact, both the candidates in the fray were not the genuine champions of the poor, they had no sympathy for the poor. But as the proverb goes, 'A brick is softer than a hard stone' and should be preferred; so I as well as my colleagues thought that of the two opponents, the one with the Congress backing was a little better. Besides, the popular tide was in favour of the Congress and the Congress was in power. I thought that being in power, the Congress would be in a position to help our people.

I had learnt my lesson. In this country it is not enough to possess good workers and volunteers to win elections; you must also possess wealth, social prestige and the quality of having been born in one of the higher castes. In addition, you must be well versed in the art of hooliganism, mobocracy and making false promises and assurances. Only with these accomplishments you are fit to enter the arena of politics. This election taught me convincingly that these accomplishments were indispensable, if ever one contemplated successful electioneering.

If fact I had not right to take part in this election as I was not endowed with even a single of these accomplishments. I thought that I committed a big blunder by letting myself be persuaded by others into this venture. I took two-three of my workers with me and met the Congress candidate on my own initiative. I told him, 'Saheb, I'm going to support you.' He was so surprised that he could not believe his ears.

Voting-day was only three days away. They did not believe that Laxman Gaikwad would support them almost at the fag-end of the campaign. They suspected some strategical move in my offer. They discussed this inside. The first step they took was to tape my statement. They asked me what my

conditions were for the support. I told in a clear unequivocal tone, 'I've incurred debts to the tune of rupees five to seven thousand to be paid to rickshaw-owners, suppliers of loudspeakers and hire-charges of vehicles. You should pay off all my outstanding debts. And after you get elected, you must initiate welfare schemes for the children of the Nomadic and Denotified Tribes. You should also take some of us on the concerned committees. That's all.'

Then they took one of my workers aside and paid him Rs. 5000. I took that amount and paid off the rickshaw-owners, loudspeader-wallahs, suppliers, pahdal-contractors, and vehicle-owners as first move, for they were angry and abusing me. Then I gave Rs. 2000 to my workers for meals and travelling expenses for the remaining two days of the electioneering. I settled everything in the amount recieved.

I had hoped that the elected candidate would remember me. Not only did he not remember, but on the contrary, I had to go through a vile experience. Because I had supported the Congress candidate in the election, all my colleagues form nomadic organizations were displeased with me. This was not all. There were discussions and slanderous innuendos were thrown out among the people to the effect that Laxman Gaikwad was offered rupees one lakh fifty thousand to keep his mouth shut. Some hinted that Gaikwad had taken an enormous amount of grease money. Thus I was defamed and disgraced on all fronts. I told many of my friends, 'I didn't receive any huge amount. In fact, they did not give me money sufficient to cover the actual expenses incurred by me.'

How far and how much could I explain? This I learnt that if workers like me ever try to assume prominece in the political field, they are vilified, disgraced and reduced to worthless nobodies. Such workers form the lowest rung of society are publicly denounced as evil persons and finally tied down like slaves just as cattle are tethered to pegs. In any case they have at present succeeded in victimimizing me. I do not consider it as my final sacrificial offering. I regard it only as a bitter experience. I have learnt how to be careful and cautious and how political leaders give tall promises with a whole aura

of sincerity about them election campaigns and do not keep them. The awareness of the extent of their falsehood has remained deeply imbedded in my mind.

The elections were over. What next? I began to feel everything around me was insecure as if I was standing on quicksand. I did not know what to do.

I had purchased a Java motorcycle to attend to the organizational welfare and other work of the Nomadic and Denotified tribes. I sold it for Rs. 4,000 and maintained my family somehow. I have once again dedicated myself with full vigour to the strengthening of the organization and thunity of these tribes. I intend to solve the vexing problem of securing a livelihood for the members of my family once and for all and then give my full time and attention to the people of the Nomadic and Denotified tribes and work among them. But I have not yet been able to find an answer to the problems of daily living.

I have taken a loan from a bank and have started a general store which is solely managed by my wife. My wife Chhabu is not an educated woman. Even then she helps me a good deal in my social work. She participates in rallies and exhorts women to work for their own upliftment. I have two daughters - Sangita and Manjusha - and a son - Prafulla. All of them go to school regularly. At present I live in Latur. My parents and brother wandered all around picking and stealing just to procure a bare living.

I too wander today, but that is to demand justice, rights, reformation and transformation for my people in the present social steel structure. There is definitely a world of difference between my nomadism and the traditional nomadism of my forefathers. But I feel that not a single problem of the Nomadic and Denotified Tribes has yet been solved. Even today the attitude of political and social leaders is vitiated by double standards and prejudiced criteria only because I and my community have been branded criminals socially and legally. These high-caste leaders see to it that I attain no position of vantage, find no firm foothold in their field. They create rich pastures for their own kith and kins. With a sweet

tongue they use and exploit me for their social and political ends proclaiming that a worker from a Nomadic and Denotified Tribe is working shoulder to shoulder and on an equal footing with them. This is nothing but a kind of deceptive exploitation.

Now my obsession is to seek various ways in which to foster and strengthen tribal movements intellectually so that a complete transformation can be achieved of the Nomadic, and Denotified Tribes, the Scheduled Castes, and the exploited and downtrodden underdogs. This I know that I shall be ever engaged in this activity.

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